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LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES IDENTIFIED WITH
SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES, THEIR FAMILIES, AND THEIR
TEACHERS

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TEACHERS

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. Without their loving support and faithful encouragement I could not have completed this endeavor. To my husband Greg, thank you for taking on the role of both parents and providing help when help was needed. It is impossible for me to tell you how much I appreciate your support and encouragement during my years of pursuing scholarly excellence. I love you more than you will ever know. To my children, Katie and Tyler, you were a constant source of strength and understanding. Lastly, to my mom, Penny, for being my biggest supporter, loudest cheerleader, shoulder to cry on, friend, and most importantly, my Mom. I love you all.

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ABSTRACT

The successful completion of high school is a goal of many Americans. Graduation rates of students identified with Specific Learning Disabilities has been steadily rising over the last decade, yet this population of students remains well below the graduation rate of students without disabilities. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of high school graduates identified with having specific learning disabilities, their families, and their teachers. A qualitative case-study methodology was used to investigate the perceptions of participants using an open-ended interview process. These interviews resulted in eight themes related to the participants' perceptions about students with disabilities, attributes of the students themselves as well as their families and educators, and services provided by the school. These themes include disability awareness; active participation in IEP process by graduate, family members, and educators; goal setting and attainment; use of supports: related services; accommodations and modifications; employment; self-determination; self-advocacy; and transition planning. Further studies should be conducted in similar small, rural school districts to determine which outcomes of the study are affected by changes in participants and/or location of the schools.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The successful completion of high school is a goal of many Americans. High school diplomas hold social as well as economic value in today's society. Studies document the correlation between high school graduation and transition to continuing education, post-school employment, and as applicable, independent living (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Kochhar-Bryant, Shaw, & Izzo, 2007). According to the 2013 U.S. Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) 68% of the 2.2 million students identified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) graduate with a standard high school diploma compared to a graduation rate of 81% students not identified with disabilities (United States Department of Education (USDE), 2015). This has long lasting effects on the college and career possibilities of these students identified with SLD which, in turn, is a factor in the unemployment rate of 39.5% for these adults (Kochhar-Bryant et al., 2007).

These numbers are too high. Students identified with SLD make up the largest identified category eligible (35%) for special education services (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014), followed by Speech or Language Impairments (21%). According to 2015 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), additional impairments include Other Health Impairment (12%), Autism (8%), Developmental Delays (6%), Emotional Disturbances (6%), Multiple Disabilities (2%), Hearing Impairment (1%), and Orthopedic Impairment (1%). Ultimately, far too many are dropping out of school or receiving a certificate of completion instead of a standard high school diploma. Unfortunately, neither of these options provides these students a practicable pathway to

meaningful employment or to a higher education. Data collected through surveys indicates that students with disabilities are often misunderstood and held to low expectations by their teachers as well as their parents (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Today's society dictates a diploma is a necessity for economic stability. It is imperative, therefore, to determine why some students identified with SLD do succeed to graduate with a standard diploma, while others do not. Policy makers, school leaders, parents, and the students themselves must use information found in today's research to transform schools so these identified students graduate with a standard diploma. James H. Wendorf, Executive Director of the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD; 2014), asserts in the introduction of *The State of Learning Disabilities*, that students need to develop their own high expectations and deserve to have educators who create an environment that supports those educational goals (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Significance of the Problem

While the dropout rate has decreased for students identified with SLD over the last decade, this group continues to remain at significant risk of not graduating with a standard diploma. Many times schools force students to make decisions that affect graduating with a standard diploma as early as elementary school (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

According to Education Week, a United States national newspaper covering K-12 education, in their report *Diplomas Count 2015: Report and Graduation Rates*, students who qualify for special education services find themselves in a precarious situation for receiving their high school diploma. It is imperative to increase the

utilization of research-based, effective, and age-appropriate instructional programs so that students with disabilities can increase their success and graduate with their peers.

High School Graduation Requirements

The Oklahoma State Department of Education (2014) requires high school graduates to complete 23 Units, or sets of competencies that are required in order to meet state graduation requirements. Coursework includes courses in English Language Arts, Science, Math, History and the Arts. Students entering ninth grade are required to enroll in either the College Preparatory/Work Ready Curriculum or the Core Curriculum. The Core Curriculum path to graduation requires the student's parent or legal guardian to complete an opt-out form as provided by the school. Both of these curriculum options meet the state's requirements for high school graduation and standard diploma. However, not all of the courses included in the Core Curriculum are aligned to the requirements for college admission. Students who complete the Core Curriculum Track or get a GED can still be admitted to college if they meet alternative standards outlined by the college or university. According to Southwestern Oklahoma State University admissions (2016), examples of these requirements include, but are not limited to graduation from an accredited high school or have a GED and meet one of the following performance requirements: a minimum ACT score of 20 or a 940 SAT score, rank in the upper 50% of their class or have a 2.7 GPA or other alternative admissions requirements for students not meeting the regular admission requirements. Students must meet additional requirements related to the End-of-Instruction (EOI) tests and the Personal Financial Literacy Passport to obtain a standard high school

diploma. Once their path is identified, students are expected to take the courses delineated below.

English. Four years of English study are required. These courses may include topics in grammar, composition, American literature, English literature, and world literature.

Science. Students must complete at least three years of laboratory science classes. The subjects studied may include chemistry, biology, physics, earth science, physical science, technology and zoology. Within these subjects, students may be required to take both an introductory and an advanced course.

Mathematics. Students must have completed three years of math in order to graduate from high school in Oklahoma. Students can take math classes in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, math analysis, statistics and calculus.

History and citizenship skills. Students must have completed three years of history in order to earn a standard high school diploma. Students need to study U.S. history, U.S. government, world history, geography, economics and geography.

Fine arts or speech. One unit of fine arts or speech is required in order to earn a standard high school diploma. Depending on the school's offerings, fulfillment of the fine arts component might consist of classes in music, art, or drama.

Foreign language or computer technology. Students have the choice of studying for two years in the same foreign or non-English language. If they opt out of foreign language, they must take two years of computer technology courses.

Testing requirements. Beginning with the students entering ninth grade, every student shall demonstrate mastery of the state academic content standards by passing

the following End-of-Instruction exams. All students must take and pass exams in English II and Algebra I. Additionally; individuals must pass two additional tests from Algebra II, geometry, English III, Biology I, and U.S. History.

Personal financial literacy requirements. The final requirement for graduation is the satisfactory demonstration of knowledge in 14 areas of instruction related to financial literacy, including topics such as credit card debt, saving money, interest, balancing a checkbook, understanding loans, identity theft, and earning income (Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), 2014).

History of Special Education

Federal attention to special education issues and special populations is required to realize the national goals for access to education for all children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS), 2010). Congress added Title VI to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, creating the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped - today known as the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

In 1972, two significant Supreme Court decisions, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Washington, D.C., Board of Education* (OSERS, 2010) applied the equal protection argument to students with disabilities. The courts held the opinion that children with disabilities have an equal right to access education. These court cases opened the doors for students with disabilities to attend public school (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996).

Public Law (P.L.) 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1975 and mandated that all school

districts educate and provide related services to all students with disabilities aged three through 21. This landmark law, together with the subsequent amendments now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; P.L. 108-446), supports federally funded entities in protecting the rights, meeting the individual needs, and improving results for infants, toddlers, and youths with disabilities (OSERS, 2015). Students who qualify are guaranteed a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) designed to meet his or her individual needs. It also guarantees the children and their parents the right to nondiscriminatory evaluation in a timely manner, access to all records, meetings and paperwork. It also requires schools to offer transition planning (OSERS, 2010).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is part of a national civil rights law that was enacted in 1973. Through Section 504, the government has the capacity to withhold funding from programs that fail to comply with the law aimed to protect qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability in federally funded programs and activities (United States Department of Education, (USDE), 2015). Persons identified with a physical or mental impairment that substantially restricts one or more major life activities are eligible for services under Section 504. Many schools use Section 504 to support students with SLD who do not require more comprehensive educational support or need only reasonable accommodations and/or modifications. Before 1975, children with disabilities were denied education based solely on the basis of their disabilities (Wright, 2015). All students who qualify for special education services under IDEA also qualify for services under Section 504, while the reverse is not always true (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

These laws, as well as others authorized over the years since the passage of IDEA, have ensured significant national progress in providing equal access to education for all children identified with disabilities ages birth through 21. National infrastructures of supports that have improved educational approaches, techniques, and practices for millions of children identified with disabilities, as well as their nondisabled classmates, are a direct result of the IDEA investments in rigorous education research, training, and technical assistance (OSERS, 2010).

In Thirty-Five Years of Progress in Educating Children with Disabilities through IDEA (2010), it is reported that core competencies are being taught to children with disabilities as a result of special education instruction and interventions designed to meet the individual needs of each child identified with a disability.

Before the authorization of the EAHCA (1975), the future of individuals with disabilities was bleak. These children were denied access to education and opportunities to learn. Their families were not given the opportunity to be involved in planning or placement decisions regarding their children and resources were not available for these children to receive an education in their neighborhood schools (OSERS, 2010). The EAHCA states that:

The four purposes of P.L. 94-142 articulated a national mission to improve access to education for all children identified with disabilities. These purposes include (1) all children with disabilities are entitled to ... a free appropriate public education which utilizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique educational needs, (2) to assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents ... are protected,

(3) to assist states and localities to provide for the education of all children with disabilities, and (4) to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities. (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975)

The law was written in reaction to the more than one million children with disabilities who were denied an education in the public schools and for those children with disabilities who had inadequate access to public education, thereby being denied an appropriate education (OSERS, 2010). Through legislation, access to education changed from being a privilege to being a right of all individuals.

Amendments made in 1990 to the EAHCA, now called the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), made sweeping changes to the law. One of these included the addition of transition services for students with disabilities. This legislation required school districts to assist students in shifting from high school to postsecondary life. In 1997, IDEA was reauthorized. This reauthorization called for more accountability at the state and local levels and required school districts to provide adequate instruction and interventions for all students with disabilities (OSERS, 2010).

A continued national assurance for access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) as well as a renewed national concern for accountability and assessment improved the educational results for students with disabilities (OSERS, 2010). Support for educators in learning how to include students with disabilities in statewide assessments, use appropriate accommodations, administer and score alternate assessments, prepare personnel, use relevant technologies, provide assistance to schools, and educate parents are notable examples of the investments that provided

leadership in contributing to improved educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Due to the passing of EAHAC (1975), IDEA (1990, 1997) and the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973), the opportunities offered to students identified with SLD in public school classrooms have grown (OSERS, 2010). Significant progress has been made toward protecting the rights, meeting the individual needs, and improving educational results for children with disabilities (OSERS, 2010). However, it is necessary to continue to broaden the commitment and responsibility for providing appropriate educational opportunities for all children. IDEA legislation needs to continue to complement, support, and expand the education of all children and more work needs to be done.

Successful Completion of High School

Appendix H includes current statistics that suggests the graduation rate of students identified with SLD has been steadily rising over the last decade, yet this population of students remains well below the graduation rate of students without disabilities (see Table 1) (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). According to No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) the graduation rate is determined by calculating the percentage of students who graduate from a secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years. Unfortunately, states and school districts have utilized a range of calculation methods that do not provide an accurate number of graduation rates across states for students identified with disabilities (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Since the federal government was lax in standardizing the requirements utilized

by states to determine graduation rates, an effort to compare rates across states has been difficult to track.

Table 1

High School Graduation Rates for Students with Disabilities 2009-2013

Year	Graduation Percent
2009-2010	74%
2010-2011	80%
2011-2012	81%
2012-2013	81%

Note: Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/data_tables.asp

Beginning in 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) proposed the Graduation Rate Compact to track graduation rates. This proposal recommended all states use the Cohort Method to calculate graduation rates. The Cohort Graduation Rate calculated the percent of students entering a ninth grade cohort who graduated with a standard diploma in four years. This method took into account transfer students or students who were retained in a grade. Upon completion of four years of high school, the students were separated into four groups:

- On-track graduate – completed high school with a standard diploma within four years or less;
- Other completer -- earned a GED or other certificate, or reached the maximum age for special education students;
- Dropout – left high school permanently during the four year cohort period or whose whereabouts are unknown;

- Off-track graduate and continuing – completed high school with a standard diploma in more than four years or is still enrolled in high school.

In order to align graduation rate data with the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) provision of ATP, states began using the Average Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) formula to calculate graduation rates. This rate is calculated by dividing the number of students who graduated with a standard diploma by the size of the incoming freshman class four years earlier. This amount is then expressed as a percentage. Only students who receive a standard high school diploma are counted. Other completers, such as those who obtain a certificate of attendance or those who receive high school equivalency credentials such as GED are not considered graduates using this formula.

Currently a majority of schools, districts, states, and the U.S. Department of Education are using a common metric to track graduation rates. Beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) was used to promote accountability and develop strategies to reduce the dropout rates and increase graduation across the nation (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). The ACGR is based on the number of students who graduate in four years with a standard high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. The cohorts are made up of students who are entering ninth grade (or the earliest year of high school) for the first time. The cohorts are “adjusted” by adding students who transfer into the cohort and subtracting students who transfer out of the cohort over the four years of high school. Unfortunately, graduation rate data collected before

2010-2011 is not necessarily comparable due to the changes in state data collection procedures.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, graduation rates for students with disabilities have increased from 59% for the 2010-2011 school year (the first year AGCR were published) to 61.9% for the 2012-2013 school year (USDE EDFACTS/Consolidated State Performance Reports, 2014-2015).

Furthermore, Education Week, a national newspaper published by Editorial Projects in Education (EPE), a non-profit organization that covers K-12 education, reports in their yearly report, *Diplomas Count 2015*, that national graduation rates for students with disabilities reached an all-time high of 81% for the 2012-2013 school-year.

Transition

The development of intervention programs that lead to positive outcomes for students with SLD depends on the successful identification of factors that predict these positive outcomes (Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind, & Herman, 2003; Test et al., 2009; McConnell et al., 2012). These programs are necessary because people who acquire high school diplomas are considered for jobs over people who do not have high school diplomas. Students who do not graduate from high school experience lower rates of employment, lower incomes, and higher rates of incarceration (Lynch, 2013).

For these students to be successful and have the necessary skills for adult life, it is critical that schools create a balanced curriculum of life skills training as well as academic instruction. Transition-focused education is one way to solve this problem. Transition-focused planning guides students, teachers, and parents towards meaningful

adult outcomes. Secondary transition is a required component for individualized education programs to help students create and meet meaningful postsecondary goals related to employment, education or training, or as needed, independent living (Test et al., 2009; McConnell et al., 2012).

A study conducted by Speckman, Goldberg, and Herman (1992) focused on identifying internal factors and external events that could discriminate between those who were successful post-graduation and those who were not. The researchers looked at eight domains of success: employment, education, independence, family relations, social relationships, crime/substance abuse, life satisfaction, and psychological health. The study traced the lives of a group of students identified with SLD in childhood. The study followed them throughout their school careers and ended with a 10-year follow up study.

No significant differences were noted between the successful and unsuccessful groups in the areas of background variables, cognitive measures, or academic achievement. However, what did differentiate the groups was discovered during the qualitative analysis of the data. This analysis revealed the successful group displayed higher levels of success attributes identified by Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, and Herman (1999) as self-awareness/self-acceptance of the SLD, proactivity, perseverance, emotional stability, appropriate goal setting, and the presence and use of effective social support systems.

In 2012, the Institute for Education Sciences (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2012) identified six types of transition outcomes: (a) behavioral, (b) social, (c) communicative, (d) functional, (e) occupational, and (f)

basic academic skills. Test et al. (2009) assembled 32 secondary-level transition practices from previous research found to improve student skills (Test et al., 2009). Numerous effective teaching strategies were also identified, but were limited because the experimental studies used to create the practices did not include data on the long-term impact of skills acquired. Test et al. (2009) identified 16 predictors of positive post-school education, employment and/or independent living outcomes for students with disabilities (Test et al., 2009). Four predictors were based on student behaviors or experiences; paid employment, self-advocacy and self-determination, self-care, and social skills. The other 12 predictors involved programs, services, placements, or processes. Paid employment was the only category that identified specific teachable student behaviors associated with positive post-school outcomes (Test et al., 2009).

In 2008, Juan identified 41 behaviors and experiences of high school students with disabilities that contributed to involvement in post-school employment or education (Juan, 2008). She then grouped these behaviors and experiences into 12 domains: (a) desires, (b) strengths, (c) disability awareness, (d) use of support systems, (e) social skills, (f) making positive choices, (g) goals, (h) limits, (i) persistence, (j) coping skills, (k) proactive involvement, and (l) transition education involvement” (Juan, 2008). McConnell et al. (2013) used this framework to develop definitions of Juan’s non-academic constructs that described student behaviors and experiences associated with post-school education and employment. These constructs, once defined, were used by McConnell et al. (2013) to develop an assessment to be used in transition planning for high school students.

In 2012, a seven-member research team assembled to develop a new transition assessment based on current secondary research. They conducted a comprehensive literature review that yielded 35 studies which met the inclusion criteria for the study; 10 constructs were identified as being associated with positive post-school outcomes of students with mild to moderate disabilities. These constructs are (a) knowledge of strengths and limitations, (b) actions related to strengths and limitations, (c) disability awareness, (d) employment, (e) goal setting and attainment, (f) persistence, (g) proactive involvement, (h) self-advocacy, (i) supports, and (j) utilization of resources (McConnell et al., 2013). These constructs were then used to provide IEP teams the means to develop annual transition goals. The Transition Assessment and Goal Generator (TAGG) provides professional, student, and family versions developed to identify strengths and needs of students identified with disabilities. This allows IEP teams to match curriculum standards to IEP goals as part of transition planning (McConnell et al., 2013).

In summary, McConnell et al. (2013) determined that students with mild to moderate disabilities must have knowledge of their own personal strengths and limitations in multiple settings, act upon this knowledge, and consider their strengths and limitations when making decisions. Furthermore, students need to understand their disabilities and be able to explain their disabilities to others. Another important factor is to have a paid job during high school. This is positively associated with employment after high school. Students with disabilities need to learn how to set and attain goals by breaking down larger goals into smaller goals and making plans to implement the attainment of the smaller goals. Persistence is an important behavior for these students

to possess. It is important for students with disabilities to be able to use a variety of strategies to complete tasks and attain goals. Students with disabilities need to use a support network and need to understand their rights and responsibilities in order to advocate for themselves. When their support group is unavailable, these students need to learn to utilize other resources for assistance (McConnell et al., 2013).

The U.S. Department of Education's Data Accountability Center (DAC) (2016), funded by the USDE to provide public access to data about children and youth with disabilities as required by the IDEA, collects and analyzes data from yearly reports submitted by school districts across the nation. DAC's mission is to encourage transparency and accountability while supporting the submission and analysis of high quality IDEA data. DAC provides technical assistance to improve states' capacity to meet IDEA requirements and is responsible for the dissemination of high quality data results.

Research collected by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) (2007) and presented in *The State of Learning Disabilities* (2014), from state reports required by the OSDE, found that 68% of high school graduates identified with SLD graduated with a standard diploma compared to 57% a decade ago. Among these, 12% received a certificate of completion (not an option in the Midwestern state in which the current study is based). However, although these certificates recognize school completion, they do not provide a path to higher education or military service (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

The dropout rate has also steadily fallen over the last decade. Only 19% of students identified with SLD dropped out of school in 2011 compared to 35% in 2002

(Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Unfortunately, this group of students continues to experience the highest dropout rates among all students identified with disabilities. The drop-out rates for these students varies widely from state to state ranging from 48% in South Carolina to 7% in Hawaii. Louisiana, Nevada, and South Carolina continue to have higher dropout rates than graduation rates for students identified with SLD (IDEAdata.org, 2011-2012).

Based on the data collected, reducing the dropout rate and increasing the graduation rate for students identified with SLD needs to remain a high priority for parents and educators. Detrimental and life-long effects of not receiving a standard high school diploma need to be addressed by providing programs to help reduce the “epidemic that threatens to undermine the success of so many youth” (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 21) identified with SLD.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the perceptions of how two high school graduates from a small, Midwestern community, who qualified for special education services due to having SLD, were able to overcome the barriers and obstacles associated with their disabilities and graduate with a standard high school diploma. The perceptions of a family member and a teacher chosen by each student are also part of this research study. By allowing the participants to tell their stories using an open-ended interview process, the researcher hopes to gain knowledge and information to provide insights for future students identified with SLD who may face many of the same obstacles while striving to obtain a standard high school diploma.

Research Questions

Through this research study I hope to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of students identified with SLD who earned a high school diploma. Based on my review of professional literature relevant to this goal, I developed the following research questions which will allow participants to describe the factors that facilitated or hindered their perseverance to obtain a high school diploma.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions and experiences of high school graduates identified with having specific learning disabilities, their families, and their teachers. My research study seeks to examine why students from a small rural town earn high school diplomas at a higher rate than the national average of students with SLD.

1. What are the graduate's perceptions of their disability in relation to obtaining a high school diploma?
 - a. What attributes do the graduates report having that allowed them to earn a high school diploma?
 - b. How do the graduates describe the types of educational services they received in public school?
2. What are the parents' perceptions of their children's disability in relation to obtaining a high school diploma?
 - a. What attributes do the parents report having that allowed them to support their children while they earned their high school diplomas?
 - b. How do the parents describe the types of educational services their children received in public school?

3. What are the educators' perceptions of students with disabilities in relation to reaching high school goals?
 - a. What attributes do the faculty members chosen by the graduates with disabilities possess that allowed them to support students with disabilities while they earned a high school diploma?
 - b. How do educators describe the types of educational services their students with disabilities received in public schools?

Chapter Summary and Overview

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 describes the problem, purpose, significance, and historical background regarding the study of the perceptions and lived experiences of high school graduates identified with SLD from a small rural school. The research questions are discussed and operational definitions for terms used throughout the study are presented (see Appendix I). Chapter 2 provides a review of literature pertinent to social learning theory and self-determination theory as they relate to the attainment of a high school diploma for students identified with SLD. Literature related to the perceptions of graduates, parents, and educators toward SLD, graduation rates of students identified with SLD, and transition planning in high schools are also presented. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in this study. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the interview data. Chapter 5 provides a reflective summary of the study, discusses the conclusions of the study, and addresses implications for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of two high school graduates identified with a SLD. They were each asked to choose a family member and a teacher to participate in the interview process. Participants were questioned using an open-ended interview method in which questions were asked that allowed participants to describe their perceptions of how these graduates overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with their disabilities in order to receive a standard diploma while many of their peers identified with SLD did not.

This chapter reviews applicable literature that focused on graduation rates and secondary outcomes of high school students identified with SLDs. Studies also examined characteristics of successful high school graduates and perceptions of SLDs from the viewpoints of families, teachers, and students. Chapter 2 also provides a summative background on the research regarding social learning theory, self-determination theory, and transition planning as it applies to the field of special education and the relationships to postsecondary outcomes for students identified with SLD.

Theoretical Framework

Social Constructivism

This research study was based on the Social Constructivism Theory (1978) of Lev Vygotsky who was one of the earliest social learning theorists. The major construct from Vygotsky's work is the belief that children learn as a result of social interactions with others. Woolfolk (1998) writes:

Whereas Piaget described the child as a little scientist, constructing an understanding of the world largely alone, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that cognitive development depends much more on interactions with the people in the child's world and the tools that the culture provides to support thinking. Children's knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and values develop through interaction with others (p. 44).

One important factor of Social Learning Theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which refers to the "ideal level of task difficulty at which a child can be successful with appropriate support" (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 109). While working in this zone, the student's understanding is furthered as a result of social interactions. Students "perform beyond their usual level of functioning when engaged in the social and cognitive collaborations that create this zone" (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2015, p. 42). If students are given tasks that they are unable to complete independently, then the task would not promote learning.

Wang (2009) wrote an essay considering the impact of Lev Vygotsky on the field of special education. Wang explains that Vygotsky's ZPD (1978) can be classified into two levels. First is the level of development in which the student can solve problems independently. The second is the potential level of development in which the student can solve problems under the guidance of the teacher, other adult, or in cooperation with peers who work at a higher intellectual level (Wang, 2009). "The theory of ZPD exerts profound influence on prediction, diagnosis, and remedy of the student's learning ability, the decision of teaching object, the carrying on of teaching activities as well as assessment of teaching results" (Wang, 2009, p. 101). According to

Wang (2009), five assumptions have been made with regard to special education based on the study of Vygotsky's theory:

1. Cognitive development is a course of social interaction; damaging social interactions may cause unfavorable development of cognitive ability.

2. Gradual assistance and guidance encourage an increase in the cognitive development zone of students with special needs.

3. Constant cognitive assessment needs to be conducted to truly identify the real potential of children.

4. Present levels of performance need to be obtained and levels of improvement need to be monitored.

5. Effective teaching must offer students teaching material in accordance with their learning level, provide relevant knowledge accumulation, concentrate on important information and utilize interactive processes.

One sub-group of Vygotsky's study of special education was children with cognition and neuropsychiatric disorders (Gandis, 1995). During the study of this group, Das (1995) reports that Vygotsky noted (a) disability is a noun with negative meaning that should only be used to positively examine children by special methods, (b) the difference of quality is more meaningful than that of quantity, (c) students with disabilities will not need to overcome damaging social positions if appropriate social support systems are established, (d) intellectual abilities of all children, both students with disabilities and typically developing students, are diverse; and finally, (e) it is acceptable for children with disabilities to exclude children without disabilities if they are creating an unfavorable culture for learning.

Vygotsky's theory (1978) also offered five viewpoints on special learning problems of children: (a) the developmental principles for typically developing and children with disabilities is almost the same, therefore, they should be educated together and take part in the same activities; (b) educational focus should be based on the merit and ability of students with disabilities, not their limitations and defects; (c) keeping students with disabilities from participating in normal interactions and activities is more detrimental to these students than the disability; and (d) the way society reacts with students with disabilities determines how they progress developmentally and psychologically.

Lev Vygotsky's viewpoints and study of empirical data has had a significant impact in the field of special education. His work helped create a more tolerant and humane special education framework in the 20th century (Gandis, 1995). Teachers today should focus more on "what a child can do" not "what they are supposed to do." Although students with disabilities have weaknesses in certain areas, they are able to compensate in other areas. It is also important to note that assessment data is unlikely to appropriately assess all students' true capabilities. These students should be provided with more opportunities to interact with adults and peers to improve their social interactions. Therefore, allowing students with disabilities to participate in normal activities is one of the main purposes of inclusive education. And finally, special education teachers should not limit themselves to their classroom, rather they should involve themselves with professional groups of educators to learn and work together to achieve common goals for all students (Wang, 2009).

Transition Planning

Dismal post-school outcomes for students with disabilities were reported prior to the 1960s (Greene & Kochhar-Bryant, 2003). Researchers, parents, and educators, along with policy makers, have been working together to find solutions to these poor outcomes. Beginning in 1963 with the passing of the Vocational Education Act (P.L. 88-210), the foundation of today's transition planning services for students with disabilities was put into place. The purpose of this act was to improve vocational programs to support disadvantaged individuals so they were able to obtain a vocational education. Educational opportunities were created by teaming local educational agencies with state rehabilitation agencies. Students were able to earn school credit, gain work experience, and have the opportunity to work with state agencies before leaving high school (Halpern, 1992).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) became known as the "Bill of Rights" for children with disabilities and their families. This legislation incorporated six major components that changed the landscape of education for students with disabilities across the United States. The components include (a) a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), (b) least restrictive environment (LRE), (c) an individualized education program (IEP), (d) procedural due process, (e) nondiscriminatory assessment, and (f) parental participation.

In 1986, the EAHCA was amended to include legislation that required each student have, no later than age 16, an individual transition plan (ITP) as part of his or her IEP. This plan allowed for a coordinated set of activities and interagency linkages

designed to promote the student's movement to post-school functions (P.L. 101-476; Miller, Lombard, & Corbey, 2007).

The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 addressed the need to ensure a transition component for students identified with disabilities. This federally mandated law requires that students who qualify for special services receive special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and, as necessary, independent living (Taylor, 2010). The context of transition planning and implementation is a systematic process. DeFur (2003) and McAfee and Greenawalt (2001) found that students with disabilities became socially isolated from their same age peers and had lower rates of employment and higher rates of incarceration upon exit from school than their non-disabled peers. Post-school outcomes for these students were bleak (Kiernan, Hoff, Freeze & Mank, 2000; Mcfee & Greenawalt, 2001).

With the reauthorization, emphasis on accountability for students who qualify for special education services became mandated and post-school outcomes were required to be monitored. The law required transition services began at 16 for all students being served on an IEP. Before these guidelines were put into place, the success of the transition from school life to adult life was determined by the severity of the student's disability and by the availability of community and agency resources (Kiernan et al., 2000; Wehman & Targett, 2001). Today, transition services have become an integral step in helping students attain successful postsecondary goals that start before graduation from high school. "It is the school's responsibility to provide a learning environment that ensures students remain encouraged to earn a high school

diploma. It is reasonable to expect that students with disabilities will complete their districts' high school graduation requirements" in today's society (Connecticut School Board Position Statement, 2010, p. 2). Receiving a standard high school diploma embodies a key element of a feasible transition plan for students identified with disabilities.

According to the Oklahoma State Department of Education Policies and Procedures for Special Education (OSDE, 2010), transition services should focus on the student's plan of study and need to be addressed yearly by the IEP team. Parents and students must be provided with information regarding opportunities for vocational education, high school career and technical education courses, school-based training, work-based training, work-study program, technology education or technology center career majors (OSDE, 2010). "The IEP must include, if appropriate, a statement of interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages" (OSDE, 2010, p. 121). Every transition-age student must be referred to a vocational rehabilitation counselor and representatives of any other agency that could be responsible for providing services. These representatives must be invited to attend the IEP meetings with the consent of parents (Kohler & Field, 2003).

Another outcome of the reauthorization of IDEA (1997) was an emphasis placed on effective or best practice research in the area of transition. Funding for major studies included the National Longitudinal Transition Study [NLTS] (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2003), a ten-year study funded by the OSEP to generate information on the experiences and achievements of students identified with disabilities during their high school years and transition into adulthood. This study involved

telephone interviews of parents of 11,000 students, ages 13 through 16, who received special education while in school, and follow-up mail surveys conducted the following year. The purpose of this study was to describe the characteristics of out-of-school youth with disabilities to determine achievements of youth with disabilities, differences in achievements of youth with disabilities across disability categories, and what individual, household, and school factors related to more positive outcomes for students with disabilities (Wagner et al., 2003). Outcomes of this study identified school engagement, academic performance, social adjustment, and independence as domains related to positive outcomes (Wagner et al., 2003).

This study, along with other small scale studies that examined transitional practices emphasized student achievement outcomes, reinforcing the importance of “considering the entirety of a youth’s characteristics, background, and experiences in developing the relationships, instructional methods, services, and supports that will best help them succeed” (Wagner & Newman, 2003, p. 13). Information gained from similar studies showed that 54% of students had a goal to attend a two- or four-year college, while 43% would like to attend a Career Tech facility; 57% wished to be employed, and 50% wished to live independently; 28% expressed strong confidence that their children would attend a postsecondary school (compared to 54% of students mentioned previously) (Kohler & Field, 2003; Zhang, Ivester, Chen, & Katsiyannis, 2005).

Research has also found that parent expectations are “associated with both levels of student achievement and general post high school outcomes” (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 22). Unfortunately, low parental expectations have greater influence over postsecondary expectations than the student’s expectations for themselves (Cortiella &

Horowitz, 2014). Ultimately, parents have the ability to play a less than optimal role in transition planning, therefore, it is important that parents are encouraged to be involved in the IEP process, especially to promote transition services, learn about what services are available, when services should be delivered, and what other services and supports, if any, their student should be receiving (Test et al., 2009).

Several experienced educational researchers conducted an analysis of secondary transition literature to build a comprehensive construct list of student's non-academic behaviors that are associated with post high school employment and education (McConnell et al., 2012). A seven-member team assembled to develop a transition assessment based on current secondary research. A five-step process was used to locate studies "that identified the non-academic behaviors of students with disabilities associated with successful participation in post-school employment and education" (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 175). Once the studies were located and behaviors identified, the research team used a consensus decision-making process to discuss and debate which constructs should be included on the final list. From this research, 10 constructs and exemplar behaviors associated with positive post-school outcomes were identified: (a) knowledge of strengths and limitations, (b) actions related to strengths and limitations, (c) disability awareness, (d) employment, e) goal setting and attainment, (f) persistence, (g) proactive involvement, (h) self-advocacy, (i) supports, and (j) utilization of resources (McConnell, et al., 2012).

Knowledge of strengths and limitations. Individuals with disabilities who are aware of their personal strengths and limitations are more likely to successfully participate in employment and education after high school (Aune, 1991; Goldberg et al.,

2003; Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg & Herman, 2002; McConnell et al., 2012). Students must also be able to communicate these strengths and limitations to others (Higgins et al., 2002; Skinner, 2004) and be able to find jobs based on these strengths. Students who can identify tasks and situations in which they anticipate to be successful are more likely to have positive post high school outcomes (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992).

Actions related to strengths and limitations. Students who are aware of their strengths and limitations must act upon this knowledge by seeking opportunities to utilize their strengths in both school and in the community (Aune, 1991; Goldberg et al., 2003; McConnell et al., 2012). Students who develop skills and strategies to compensate for their disabilities or do not choose activities that require frequent use of their disabilities are more successful than students who do not (Gerber et al., 1992).

Disability awareness. Individuals' self-understanding of their disability provides the foundation for all transition skills (Aune, 1991). Individuals with disabilities who successfully participate in employment and further education are aware of their disability but do not let the disability define who they are (Goldberg et al., 2003). This process begins with the student's ability to "define" their disability followed by an understanding of the challenges they may face due to their disability (Gerber et al., 1992).

Persistence. Persistence is defined as attempting to attain goals in spite of barriers (Raskind et al., 2002). Individuals with disabilities that show persistence did not give up when faced with adversity, but learned to be flexible and use a variety of strategies to complete their individual goals (Gerber et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2003).

These students were also able to seek out individuals for assistance (Greenbaum, Graham & Scales, 1995).

Proactive involvement. Individuals with disabilities who are engaged in the world around them by participating in community activities and take an active role in families, neighborhoods, and friend groups are more successful in the areas of post high school education and employment (Goldberg et al., 2003; Halpern, Yovanoff, Doren, & Benz, 1995).

Goal setting and attainment. Students who are able to set goals and commit to reaching them are more likely to participate in postsecondary employment and education than those who do not (Gerber et al., 1992). The ability to set goals predicted post-school employment and education “better than IQ, academic achievement, social economic status, and ethnicity” (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 183). These individuals are able to break large goals into smaller more manageable pieces and complete the smaller goals in sequential order (Thoma & Getzel, 2005). Portley, Martin, and Hennessey (2012) found students in districts that allow students to help develop their postsecondary goals have greater post-school employment and education outcomes. Benz et al. (2000) discovered that students who complete four or more of their transition goals are more likely to be involved after high school and Aune (1991) determined that active involvement in IEP meetings allows students with disabilities to set appropriate goals and determine the smaller steps needed to reach these goals.

Employment. Students who obtain employment during high school are more likely to be employed after high school (Doren & Benz, 1998; Lindstrom, Doren & Miesch, 2011; McConnell et al., 2012). Students who express a desire to obtain a job

and then actively look for a position using effective job search skills experience higher rates of successful post-school employment (Benz et al., 2000). Students with disabilities that participate in work-study or vocational education (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997), job internships (Fabian, Lent, & Willis, 1998), or mentoring programs (Shandra & Hogan, 2008) increase the likelihood of full-time employment upon completion of high school. And finally, students who have paid employment experiences during high school are able to find jobs that match their skills and interests in their communities (McConnell et al., 2012; Portley et al., 2012).

Self-advocacy. Self-advocacy and self-determination are interdependent constructs significantly tied to the success of students with SLD. Students who have little knowledge of their disability, understanding of their learning strengths and weaknesses, awareness of resources available to them, knowledge of their rights, or how to access services and advocate for their academic needs are at a disadvantage with higher likelihood of unsuccessful post-school outcomes (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002; Lock & Layton, 2001).

Transition planning that includes instilling knowledge and skills needed to self-advocate as well as teaching students with disabilities to advocate for their educational needs has implications that reach past the classroom and into their post-school lives. Teaching self-advocacy skills in high school will help provide individuals with disabilities with tools to ensure that society honors their rights as individuals (Popcock, Lambros, Karvonen, Test, Algozzine, Wood, & Martin, 2002).

Self-advocacy is a process that begins with self-determination and results in the empowerment of the student (Field & Hoffman, 1996). Skills needed for students to

recognize and communicate their needs, negotiate services, assert their rights, and make their interests and desires known are required for students to be successful.

(Brinckerhoff, 1994; Van Reusen, Bas, Shumaker, & Deshler, 1994). In addition, communication, metacognition, and goal identification are three skills that students with disabilities need to develop to increase their self-advocacy skills (Basset & Lehmann, 2002). These skills include the ability to ask questions and seek clarification, understand their strengths and weaknesses, envision their future, and develop attainable long-term goals and objectives to successfully meet these goals (Basset & Lehmann, 2002; Layton & Lock, 2003).

Instilling self-advocacy skills in students with learning disabilities as the focus of transition planning has been extensively researched. Effective programs offer a combination of supports and services designed to help students understand their strengths and weaknesses, provide counseling and mentoring, and acquaint students with organizations intended to provide support, people who are knowledgeable of the nature of the disability and aware of the needs of the student, and access to technology (Allard, 1987).

Supports. The use of support systems has contributed to the improved outcomes of adults with disabilities (Raskind et al., 1999). “Students who received support, advice, and encouragement that came from significant others, including family members, close friends, faculty, or academic support providers” (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 184) were found to have higher success rates in school achievement (Benz et al., 2000). Benz et al (2000) also found that students with disabilities need educators that encourage their efforts, provide gentle pushing, and acknowledge their

accomplishments. Students with disabilities that have a group of positive individuals they can count on for support are more likely to participate in post high school employment and education (Gerber et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2003; Raskind et al., 2002).

Utilization of resources. Students who learn to seek support from teachers, secretaries, counselors, coaches, etc. while learning skills enabled them to be successful in post-school employment and education (Gerber et al., 1992; Raskind et al., 2002). These individuals are also able to actively seek people and resources outside of their immediate network and thus problem-solve in order to find possible support services from community agencies (Gerber et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2003).

This research was conducted to enable McConnell et al. (2012) to create a transition assessment that is able to identify meaningful annual transition goals that will increase the likelihood of participation in postsecondary employment and education for students with disabilities.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination is defined across the field as an “awareness of interests, strengths, and needs. Individuals with disabilities who are self-determined set goals and take action on their plans to attain their goals” (Martin, Martin, & Osmani, 2014, p. 72). Setting goals, developing and acting out plans, evaluating progress, and making adjustments if the goal was not accomplished are also part of the self-determination plan (Martin & Marshall, 1995). Students with disabilities, therefore, should learn goal setting and attainment skills early and have opportunities to develop and practice these goal attainment skills through high school (Martin, Marshall, & Maxson, 1993). Self-

determination planning focuses on individuals' ability to make their own decisions, determine their own goals, and accept the result of these actions (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2010; Miller et al., 2007). Field & Hoffman (1996) defined self-determination as:

A combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. Self-determination is an understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in one-self as capable and effective. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the roles of adults in our society. (p. 115)

Self-determination, as it applies to the field of special education, is an ongoing process wherein students know about and understand their disability, including their strengths and weaknesses, but understand that the disability is a part of them and does not define them. They are allowed to participate in the goal making aspects of their education and also are allowed to play an active part in the goal attainment aspect of reaching those set goals. As the students experience these activities they are given the opportunity to monitor the outcomes and allowed to adjust their goal path to ensure success. The consequences of poor transition planning include unemployment, dependent living arrangements, limited recreational and leisure opportunities, social isolation, and an overdependence on governmental agencies/services (Wehman & Targett, 2001).

Active involvement in their educational goal attainment requires students identified with SLD to practice self-determination skills during high school (Bassett & Lehmann, 2002). Examples of this include the ability to speak and act on one's behalf,

which are important skills for students in school settings, including IEP meetings, and in post-school adult life. Active involvement also includes making informal decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions (Van Reusen et al., 1994). Providing students adequate information about their disabilities and the appropriate accommodations and modifications at their disposal allows those students to learn self-determination as part of the IEP process which, in turn, allows students with disabilities the opportunity to improve the skills needed to be as independent as possible in their adult lives (Cobb & Alwell, 2009; Guy, Sitlington, Larson & Frank, 2009; Rothman, Maldonado, & Rothman, 2008).

Rural School District Research

The United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB; 2000) recognizes rural schools by the following criteria:

- (1) Located in small (below 2,500 people) and relatively isolated communities (at least two hours away from a major metropolitan area);
- (2) Low SES (income below \$23,000 a year) with a prevalence of low-end jobs (agricultural or low-skill industry), with a low area median education (standard high school diploma, vocational training, but a majority without formal postsecondary education);
- (3) Normally, a varying level of population diversity (significant percentages of ethnic minorities) and population stability (vs. instability through transience and outmigration) (Hardre et al., 2007).

Very little systematic research has been done in rural schools compared to work in urban and suburban educational settings (Ganadara, Gutierrez & O'Hara, 2001).

Hardre (2007) reports over 30% of U.S. schools are in rural communities, but less than 6% of research conducted has included rural populations. The minimal research available for rural communities indicates rural students are at risk for low motivation and lack of school success, because these schools offer fewer programs than urban or suburban schools and teachers are often required to be experts in multiple subject areas for multiple grades (Balloue & Podgursky, 1995; Colangelo, Assouline & New, 1999; D'Amico, Matthes, Sankar, Merhan, & Zurita, 1996).

Hardre and Sullivan (2009) recruited participants from 10 public high schools in an effort to determine perceived environmental characteristics, self-perception variables, and goals among rural high school students. The researchers were interested in finding out the “relationship between students’ perceptions of their rural school and community environment and their perceptions about themselves” (p. 4).

The researchers administered a paper-based questionnaire to all general education classes in the schools that were randomly selected to participate. Students were asked to choose a specific academic class and teacher to think about while responding to the questionnaire. The findings suggested rural communities tend to be unique and local values and opportunities influence the attitudes of students and their families about education and employment. Moreover, it also indicated rural students’ motivational profile is quite complex. Learning goals, perceived competence, and instrumentality/value exhibit direct influences on intention to graduate, beyond the effects of achievement (Hadre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009). Patterns of ideas, values, and feelings from the community context integrate into the identities of the youths (Bleeker & Jacobs, 2004). These values may differ from and could conflict with the

school-based values and goals framed on a national level (Corbett, 2009). Corbett (2009) found a spirituality that was rooted in spatial and temporal “connection” with their community, this same community that gave them the ability to know who and where they were; instead of the “educational system” trying to wrench students from their home, a rural community in which the outside world tried to make the “rural” atmosphere seem unworthy as a place to live. Corbett (2009) maintained that publicly funded infrastructure and services in rural communities are a crucial way to attract the rural youth back to their communities upon completion of a postsecondary education. The researcher also suggested that schools in rural communities should become community showcases for rural economic development (Corbett, 2009). Finally, rural communities and schools struggled with tension between education that matters locally and education that promotes and provides the necessary intellectual, social, and geographic mobility opportunities to rural youth.

Because of federal mandates, schools are focusing upon national tests over local workplace skills (Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996) and are often preparing their students for lives and jobs very different from where and how they currently live (Woodrum, 2004). School districts claim these national goals are productive and necessary; however, the local community and culture may deem other skills more appropriate for their students to acquire (Corbett, 2009). This inconsistency leads to contradictory messages from the school and community to the students, which can cause them personal conflict. The conflict between educational goals and community expectations can lead to lower educational aspirations and can delay postsecondary education (Hektner, 1995). More studies need to be conducted to compare differences

between rural and non-rural students as well as educational practices tested in the specialized setting of rural schools (Hardre & Sullivan, 2009).

Hadre (2007) determined that more and different achievement indicators need to be identified to better understand the role of achievement relative to subject area content. Continuing research on rural school communities and students is important to understand the characteristics that underlie achievement and future-oriented educational outcomes.

Specific Learning Disability

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) reports in its publication *The State of Learning Disabilities in 2014* (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014) that approximately 80% of the 2.7 million public school students in the United States who qualify for special education services have specific learning disabilities (SLD). In order to understand how this large number of students who qualify for special education services and the effects of how students identified with SLD are functioning in today's schools, it is necessary to define what a SLD is. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990) a SLD is

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation

(now known as intellectual disability), of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (20 U.S.C. 1401 (30))

Another definition provided by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA; 2013) broadens the previously given definition to reflect more of a clinical understanding of the condition (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). The diagnosis requires persistent difficulties in reading, writing, arithmetic, or mathematical reasoning skills during formal years of schooling. Symptoms may include inaccurate or slow and effortful reading, poor written expression that lacks clarity, difficulties remembering number facts, or inaccurate mathematical reasoning.

Current academic skills must be well below the average range of scores in culturally and linguistically appropriate tests of reading, writing, or mathematics. The individual's difficulties must not be better explained by developmental, neurological, and sensory (vision or hearing), or motor disorders and must significantly interfere with academic achievement, occupational performance, or activities of daily living. SLD is diagnosed through a clinical review of the individual's developmental, medical, educational, and family history, reports of test scores and teacher observations, and response to academic interventions (APA, 2013).

According to *The State of Learning Disabilities: Facts, Trends and Emerging Issues* (NCLD, 2014), the most common types of SLD are those that affect the areas of reading, math, and written expression. Information processing is also a noted weakness associated with SLD. Cortiella and Horowitz (2014, p. 4) state, "Weaknesses in the ability to receive, process, associate, retrieve, and express information can often help

explain why a person has trouble with learning and performance”. These disabilities are both real and permanent and students who exhibit these weaknesses can show signs of low self-esteem, frustration, and social withdrawal. Many of these students do not realize that their difficulties in the classroom are caused by a SLD until they are older. By this time they, and others, have set low expectations for themselves, struggle with underachievement and end up in trouble with the law at a higher frequency than their non-SLD peers (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Early recognition can prevent years of struggles and self-doubt for students identified with SLD. As they grow older, learning about the specific nature of their disability and receiving help in accepting that the disability does not define who they are but what they have, and helping them to understand and use the types “of services and accommodations and supports they need to be successful will help them overcome barriers to learning and become independent, self-confident and contributing members of society” (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 3).

General Knowledge about Learning Disabilities

Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) showed 845 respondents saw SLD as a growing problem in the United States and 63% were familiar with someone with SLD. Most people (91%) were familiar with dyslexia, while two thirds of the people were not familiar with dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and dyspraxia. The majority of people (62%) responded they believed diagnosis occurred as a joint diagnosis between a pediatrician, parent/caregiver, teacher and school administrator, while others thought SLD was diagnosed in the early schooling stage. Over 50% believed SLD is diagnosed between grades 1-4 and 23% thought they were diagnosed in kindergarten. Nearly 80% of the

respondents correctly identified genetics as a possible cause of SLD, while 43% wrongly thought SLD correlated with IQ scores. Twenty-five percent of the respondents thought SLD was caused by watching too much television, 31% believed SLD was caused by poor diet, and 24% believed SLD was caused by childhood vaccinations. More than 30% of the respondents thought a lack of early childhood parent/teacher involvement lead to SLD and 83% said that early intervention could help, but half of these incorrectly cited medication and mental health counseling as treatments. Over 50% of the respondents also believed corrective eyewear was a treatment option for certain SLD (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Wendorf stated, “These surveys clearly demonstrate the need for greater understanding of SLD throughout society” (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 7).

Perceptions of Specific Learning Disabilities

In 2012, the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) conducted a research study where data from approximately 2,000 adults in the United States was gathered from an online survey. An evenly distributed number of males and females responded to the online survey.

The results of this study showed 12% of the respondents mentioned having SLD and 8% of the parents surveyed had a child with SLD (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Parents of Children with Learning Issues

In 2013, an independent research study was conducted to identify the “spectrum of attitudes, beliefs, values, and challenges among parents of children with learning issues” (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p.9). Data was gathered from 2,241 parents of children ages 3-18. Out of the parents surveyed, 68% reported having children

identified with learning issues and 32% suspected their children had learning issues.

Survey data yielded the following information that fell into three categories:

Those who were struggling with the challenges that come with having a child with a learning disability and report that they need help, those who were conflicted about their ability to manage the needs of their child with these issues, and those who were optimistic about their family's journey with learning and attention issues, but continue to need information and guidance. (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 9)

Strugglers. Thirty-five percent of the parents surveyed were deeply struggling with their child's disability. They saw parenting as difficult, experienced financial pressure, felt isolated and anxious, experienced difficulty maintaining positive relationships, were unable to manage their own stress, and felt pessimistic about their children's future.

Conflicted. Thirty-one percent of the parents surveyed admitted to having conflicted feelings about their children's disability. These parents, who felt ambivalence (accepted their child's disability but also expressed some denial-like doubts), experienced trouble managing their own stress, were uncertain about teaching their children how to manage issues themselves or when to ask for help, were unsure about advocating for their children, were frustrated with the school system, and worried about their children's social and academic future.

Optimistic. Finally, 34% of parents had positive feelings about their children's disability and their own ability to cope. This group was characterized by parents who were optimistic about their ability to cope. They saw themselves as successful, able to

effectively advocate with teachers and the school system, find experts, teach their children about their disabilities and how to cope, manage stress, provide a strong support system, had no evidence of feelings of guilt, expressed confidence, and had developed ways to deal with their children's learning and attention issues (Morin, 2014).

The Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation commissioned a study in 2010 to examine the public's attitude about SLD (Tremaine Foundation, 2010). One thousand adults aged 18 and over, 700 parents of children under 18, and 700 teachers and school administrators were interviewed by telephone to "capture the understanding and attitudes of the public and of educators and to assess progress—or lack of progress—in how both parents and the United States educational system are addressing the needs of children who learn differently" (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 10). The data collected identified many advances in the public's understanding of SLD and yielded support for adapting curriculum to meet children's learning styles. However, the interviews also brought to light "persistent misconceptions that present barriers for anyone interested in ensuring that children with learning differences are helped to achieve their full potential" (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 10). Results from the study yielded results that are both gratifying and troubling.

Gratifying Trends

The Tremaine Foundation study (2010) found the general public and parents, as well as educators, believed students with SLD have unique learning needs and challenges that are not due to below-average intelligence. Seventy-nine percent of the public and 99 percent of educators agreed that children learn differently, which is a nine

point increase from 2004. The number of Americans who said they were familiar with SLD has increased. The majority of the general public acknowledged that children with SLD are of average or above average intelligence and almost 96% of parents agreed that children can learn to compensate for a SLD if taught how (Tremaine Foundation, 2010).

Troubling Trends

Although the public's perception of SLD is improving, parents and educators still retain a startling lack of knowledge concerning SLD. Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) found seven out of 10 parents, educators, and members of the general public linked SLD with intellectual disability (formerly "mental retardation") and autism as did more than half of school administrators. Four in 10 connected SLD with sensory impairments such as blindness or deafness. Fifty-five percent of the general public, 55 percent of parents, four in 10 teachers and three in 10 administrators wrongly believed that SLD were a product of the home environment in which children are raised. Even more disturbing was approximately half of the respondents thought SLD were a result of laziness (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Many parents were found to ignore potential signs of trouble and chose to "wait and see if their child will grow out of it" (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014 p. 11). The majority of educators (66%) believed lack of assistance from parents in helping their children learn was a major challenge confronting schools. Despite confusion among educators about SLD, eight in 10 said they felt confident teaching children identified with SLD (Tremaine Foundation, 2010).

The results of this study suggested that even though millions of individuals face challenges associated with SLD on a daily basis, there is still widespread confusion and

misinformation about the nature and impact of SLD from parents, educators, and the general public. This lack of accurate information increases the potential of stigmatization and the possibility of lowered school and work expectations as well as opportunities not only in school but also in the community and the workplace (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Studies on perceptions of youth with SLD can give educators the insight to understand students' perceptions so that more effective strategies and interventions can be developed. Important areas of information that need to be gathered include their overall perceptions of school, aspects of the schools that these students feel meet their individual needs, aspects of school that appear to be failing in meeting their needs, and areas where improvement is needed (Kortering & Braziel, 2002).

During the 1998-1999 school year, 185 students identified with SLD were recruited to participate in a research study conducted by Kortering and Braziel. This landmark study is important because it documented the actual perceptions of students with SLD to gain knowledge so educators could design learning strategies and interventions to help students graduate from high school (Kortering & Braziel, 2002).

Results from the study are insightful. The best part of school for the participants included opportunities to socialize with peers. This most often took place during breaks between classes, during class, or during lunch. Participants also appreciated classes that were more interactive. These classes allowed them to experience success while providing learning opportunities that met the student's interests. Finally, some of the participants experienced learning as the best part of the school day. Boring or too difficult classes accounted for the majority of participant answers addressing the worst

part of school. Teachers, considered by the participants, as mean, uncaring, or difficult to work with accounted for the next largest group of responses. Finally, peers who were hard to get along with, had a bad attitude, or made fun of the participants were also listed as the worst part of school. Length of day, length of classes, rules, and tests were the least mentioned answers to the interview questions.

Changes in school, family, and personal habits that the participants felt would help keep them in school included more individual help at school, changes in school rules, attitude changes for some teachers, and a change in classes needed for graduation. Other participants mentioned making school more fun, assigning less homework, offering incentives, and allowing students' individual study programs could help keep them in school (Kortering & Braziel, 2002). The most mentioned family change involved more encouragement or support at home. Personal changes were the largest reported category for ways to keep students in school long enough to graduate. They noted they "should work harder, earn better grades, change their attitudes, and improve their behavior or attendance" (Kortering & Braziel, 2002, p. 183).

Finally, students were asked what recommendations they had for improving classes, texts, teachers, and administrators. Acquiring better textbooks and reducing class size as well as changing teacher attitudes, hiring better teachers, and an overall "less strict" school attitude were mentioned. Also, changes for administrators included becoming better student listeners.

Findings of this study revealed the participants faced considerable challenges in high school paired with a limited capacity to succeed in academic challenges. This requires a need for teaching strategies that help students compensate for learning

problems (deBettencourt & Sabornie, 1998). Schools also should help students be more resilient while preparing them to deal with these barriers to success once they leave school (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Another finding seemed to direct attention toward the responsibility of the participants themselves in their school success. Teaching students to take responsibility to make better grades, work harder in class, or change their attitudes and behavior in class seemed to be a common theme amongst all of the participants. Students need to have more input into their IEPs and be given the opportunities to direct their educational and related services around their individual goals and objectives (Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1999).

Students' perceptions of teaching strategies in high school programs are relevant in connection with decreasing the non-graduation rate of students with SLD. The information gathered from this study is valuable information for teachers, not only in special education classrooms, but also teachers in general education classrooms because of No Child Left Behind, and the push to keep students with disabilities in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible (NCLB, 2001).

Predictors of Success

Success is not an easy term to define. It means different things to different people at different times in a person's life. Even though views of success may differ, there are a number of factors that people include when defining success. Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, and Herman's (2003) study that interviewed 41 participants with a focus on their individual educational history, employment history, residence history, family relations, community relations, physical health, psychological health, recreation,

financial status, criminal contacts, drug and alcohol use, and a wide range of personal/psychological attitudes and behavior. These interviews identified factors of success as “good friends, positive family relations, being loved, self-approval, job satisfaction, physical and mental health, financial comfort, spiritual contentment, and an overall sense of meaning in one’s life” (Wiley, 2009, p. xxii).

Other studies conducted by Fafard and Haubrich (1981), Fink (1998), and Gerber et al. (1992) report findings that educational attainment, academic achievement, cognitive development, psychological health, social relationships, marital status, independent living, and employment status (Goldberg et al., 2003) are attributes that the participants of the studies considered successful people to possess. The results of these studies help us understand the desired traits demonstrated by successful individuals, but provide little information about the relationship between these specific outcomes and their antecedent variables. In order to develop intervention programs that lead to positive life outcomes, predictive factors of specific outcomes need to be identified (McKinney, 1994).

The following research studies were conducted to identify predictive variables that lead to successful outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Raskind et al., 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, goal setting, presence and use of effective social support systems, and emotional stability/emotional coping strategies were identified as success attributes and demonstrated by successful participants in these studies. These participants “demonstrated an enhanced self-awareness and the ability to compartmentalize their SLD that allowed them to acknowledge strengths as well as weaknesses” (Raskind et al., 2002, p.230). Successful

participants were engaged socially and often demonstrated leadership roles in the family, at work, and in the community. They were able to consult with others for advice and took responsibility for the outcomes of decisions made. They were persistent in meeting their goals, but could be flexible in altering paths if the outcomes were not as expected. These individuals were able to set realistic goals for themselves and were aware of the steps needed to attain these goals. They were also able to reciprocate and provide support and care for others. Lastly, they had developed strategies to recognize and reduce stress in their lives, and had developed strong peer and family relationships that helped them to cope with stressful situations and maintain emotional stability (Raskind et al., 2002).

Although predictive variables were identified, the results did not lead to an understanding of how these variables were attained, developed, or manifested in the individuals. The quantitative nature of these studies enabled the researchers to ascertain that certain variables *can* predict outcomes, but did little to explain *how* these variables shaped the individuals' life course (Goldberg et al., 2003).

The Frostig Center, a research center and school for individuals with learning disabilities located in Pasadena, CA, conducted a 20-year study that highlighted the importance of six success attributes exhibited by individuals with specific learning disabilities: self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, goal setting, the presence and use of effective support systems, and emotional coping strategies. Though some people who have these attributes may not be successful, the chances of achieving a fulfilling and successful life increased when these attributes were present. Researchers indicated these

characteristics have a greater influence on success than such factors as gender, socio-economic status, intelligence, and academic achievement (Raskind et al., 2002).

Research has shown that personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors are present to various degrees in successful people identified with SLD. In the school setting, however, efforts are usually concentrated on the academic/educational areas while little attention is paid to the development of the remainder of the attributes. In order to promote success in these students, it is important to foster the development of all of these attributes.

Benz, Lindstrom, and Yovanoff (2000) conducted a study of nearly 1,000 students identified with disabilities who exited high school with a standard high school diploma to determine what dimensions of students' secondary education experiences contributed to success in high school. They also sought to determine whether secondary and transition program components, as suggested by research, actually produced improved outcomes for students identified with SLD. Previous research suggested (Benz et al., 1997; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Halpern et al., 1995; Heal & Rusch, 1995; McGrew, Bruininks, & Thurlow, 1992; Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, & Newman, 1993; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997) that postsecondary outcomes are improved by (a) participation in vocational education classes, especially occupationally-specific courses; (b) participation in paid work experience in the community; (c) competence in functional, academic, community living, personal-social, vocational, and self-determination skills; (d) participation in transition planning, graduation from high school, and an absence of continuing instructional needs in the previously mentioned categories after leaving school.

Chapter Summary and Overview

The focus of this chapter has been to review literature applicable to this study that focuses on graduation rates and secondary outcomes of high school students identified with SLD and research-based appropriate classroom practices. Studies also examined characteristics of successful high school graduates and perceptions of SLD from the viewpoints of families, teachers, and students. This chapter provided a summative background to the research regarding social learning theory, self-determination theory, and transition planning as it applies to the field of special education and the relationships to postsecondary outcomes for students identified with SLD, especially with respect to high school graduation and the challenges these students faced in public school. Chapter 3 will focus on the research design and methodology of this dissertation research study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of Study

According to the 2013 U.S. Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP, 2013), 68% of the 2.2 million students identified with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) leave school with a standard high school diploma. Therefore, 32% do not. This has long term effects on the college and career prospects of students identified with SLD, which, in turn, contributes to an unemployment rate of 39.5% for these adults (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). These numbers are too high. Students identified with SLD make up the largest group eligible for special education services, close to 35%.

Ultimately, far too many are dropping out of school or receiving certificates of completion. Unfortunately, neither of these options gives these students a practicable pathway to meaningful employment or to higher education. Surveys conducted by the National Center for Learning Disabilities show that students identified with SLD are often held to low expectations due to misconceptions about disabilities of classroom teachers, and often even their own parents (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Students identified with SLD also tend to report they believe they will graduate with a standard diploma even though they are most often removed from the standard diploma track as early as elementary school (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

While the dropout rate has improved dramatically for students identified with SLD over the last decade (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014), this group continues to remain at significant risk of not completing high school. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) revised the 2014 edition of the publication *The State of Learning Disabilities* to include results yielded from national surveys and interviews that tell the

stories of individuals with disabilities in society today (NCLD, 2014). One concern that was described in the current report is that schools are forcing students to make decisions regarding graduation as early as elementary school. One of the key findings of the study is the concern that states that offer multiple types of diplomas are removing students from the standard diploma track. This results in fewer students identified with SLD graduating with a standard diploma due to decisions made early in their school careers (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Research Design

Because early identification often excludes students identified with SLD from participating in the high school curriculum college track (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014), special education research is relying more on qualitative research that gleans knowledge of the perspectives of those involved in the education of these students to help make better educational choices. Qualitative research is generally regarded as an approach to research that utilizes methodologies designed to provide a rich, contextualized picture of an educational or social phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004; Schwandt, 2001). There are different types of qualitative research designs including basic qualitative research, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study research (Merriam, 1998; Tesch, 1990). Regardless of the particular methodology used, the basic characteristics of the process remain similar.

Several features tend to characterize most qualitative research. These include: a) the purpose of qualitative research is to gain understanding and meaning from the phenomenon being studied, b) the researcher plays an important part in data collection

and analysis, c) data is collected in the field, d) analysis is completed using an inductive process, and e) the findings are richly descriptive, providing a full contextual picture of the phenomenon being studied (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004).

Each feature involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach, emphasizing processes and meanings that stress how social knowledge is constructed and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

The subjects identified for this study are unique within themselves and offer diverse perspectives across, and within, disability categories (Mertens, 2010). Goldberg et al. (2003) prefers to use a qualitative approach when “a richer more robust understanding of the characteristics, attributes, qualities and environmental factors that affect the life outcomes of a person with LD are being studied” (p.222). Qualitative analysis is used to understand the meaning of or the characteristics of a phenomenon within a specific context rather than simply measuring how much of the phenomenon is present (Bos & Richardson, 1994). Qualitative research provides more detail about the uniqueness of the student’s disabilities than quantitative studies.

Creswell (2007) identified a list of characteristics for good qualitative research, including rigorous data collection procedures, a study framed within the assumptions regarding a qualitative approach, the use of a recognized approach to research, and an ethical research design. This corresponds with Janesick’s (1998) important decisions the qualitative researcher must make prior to beginning the study, including research questions based on literature used to guide the study, appropriate participant selection, access to the participants, and selection of appropriate research strategies.

In 2003, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Division of Research established a task force to address the “problems” of conducting special education research (Odom et al., 2005). This task force concluded that, due to the complex nature of the field of special education, qualitative designs were validated as appropriate research methodologies in which to conduct special education research (Odom et al., 2005).

Paradigm

This research study was based on a constructivist paradigm which asserts that there is no universal truth waiting to be discovered. Meaning comes in and out of existence because of our engagement with the realities in our world (Crotty, 1998). This paradigm suggests that the human creation of meaning is subjective (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Crotty further explains that meaning emerges from interaction with the world and objects in the world. Therefore, everyone’s perspective will be different depending on their experiences (Crotty, 1998).

Because meaning is constructed, not created, each individual brings background knowledge or “world stuff” in which meaning is built. In other words, there is no knowledge to be discovered using this type of research epistemology. It is my job as the researcher to interpret the meanings the individuals have constructed as they engage with the objects in the world (Crotty, 1998).

An advantage of this approach is the close collaboration between the participants and the researcher. This enables participants to tell their stories and describe their views of reality while allowing the researcher to better understand the participants’ perceptions (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart,

1993). Findings from research based on the social constructivist tradition of inquiry build on the assumptions that human beings seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Yin, 2003).

Methodology

Case study as a methodology is a type of design in which the researcher explores a defined case over time using detailed, in-depth data collection strategies involving multiple sources of information (Yin, 2003). I selected a multiple-case case study research design for this qualitative research study. This type of design is used when multiple cases are studied to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004). Yin (2003) proposes a multiple-case study design when replication across cases can strengthen the validity of the study. The use of interviews, self-reports, or other means are used in order to gain intense and detailed information from the different perspectives of the cases being researched.

Case study research plays an important role in special education research due to the emphasis on the individual. Case study research is a type of qualitative research in which a systematic approach is used to gain understanding of the qualities of a phenomenon within a particular context (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klingener, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Qualitative research answers questions about “what is happening?” and “why or how it is happening?” (Shavelson & Towne, 2002, p. 99). This type of research explores attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of the participants in order to examine the personal reactions and contexts of their individual lived experiences. Qualitative research has and continues to contribute to the field of special education by providing

credible and trustworthy evidence for practice and policy development (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Qualitative research involves empiricism as described below.

Empiricism. Empiricism is knowledge obtained from careful observation. The following information details the types of empirical knowledge that can be obtained while observing participants of a research study:

- Knowledge production – about perspectives, settings, and techniques
- Particular research skills and tools – systematic use of qualitative methods
- Production of scientific evidence – valid information about social, material, and physical worlds
- Coherent articulation of results – qualitative research studies establish the purpose and usefulness of findings as well as their implications in the field (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

The purpose of this study is to discover commonalities and differences between the individual experiences of the participants in order to understand the meaning the participants made of their lived experiences. I chose to employ Moustakas' (1994) research model consisting of four methodological steps: (1) prepare to collect data, (2) collect data, (3) organize, analyze, and synthesize data, (4) provide a summary including implications and outcomes provided by the data. Preparation for the research study included formulating the research questions and the definitions of relevant terms of the questions, reviewing literature prior to research, development of the criteria for selecting participants, and development of questions for the research interviews (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

This research study explored the lived experiences of students identified with SLD. Based on the review of literature, the following research questions were generated to allow participants to describe the factors that facilitated their perseverance to obtain a high school diploma and the factors that promoted their success.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of high school graduates identified with specific learning disabilities, their families, and their teachers. This investigation sought to examine why students from a small rural town earn diplomas at a higher rate than the national average.

1. What are the graduates' perceptions of their disability (SLD) in relation to obtaining a high school diploma?
 - a. What attributes do the graduates report having that allowed them to earn a high school diploma?
 - b. How do the graduates describe the types of educational services they received in public school?
2. What are the parents' perceptions of their children's disability (SLD) in relation to obtaining a high school diploma?
 - a. What attributes do the parents report having that allowed them to support their children while they earned a high school diploma?
 - b. How do the parents describe the types of educational services their children received in public school?
3. What are the educators' perceptions of students with disabilities (SLD) in relation to reaching high school goals?

- a. What attributes do the faculty members selected by the graduates with disabilities possess that allowed them to support students with disabilities while they earned a high school diploma?
- b. How do educators describe the types of educational services their students with disabilities received in public schools?

Sampling

It is impossible to collect data on every individual in a specific group. There are 2.2 million students in the United States identified with SLD. I used a case-study methodology for this research study because it allowed me to explore, in depth, the perceptions of my participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of the study was to allow the participants to describe "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

Mertens (2010) contends that sampling is relatively flexible in qualitative research. Participants were chosen based on the criteria constructed by the literature review and the emerging research questions (Mertens, 2010). Purposeful sampling was used for the initial identification of participants for this research case study. This method allowed me to select participants who met the criteria from which information based on my research questions could best be answered through the use of open-ended interviews and in-depth study (Patton, 2002). These participants were selected based on the following criteria (a) students from a small, Midwestern, rural high school; (b) identified with having a SLD; (c) placed on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); and (d) graduated with a standard diploma. Additional participants were selected using

the snowball sampling process where each of the initial participants selected a family member and a school faculty.

Rural Community

This study took place in a rural, Midwestern community. According to the 2010 census, the population of the community was 796 people. This included 434 males and 362 females. The residents included 76.5% White, 10% Hispanic, 8% American Indian, 3% two or more races, 2% black, and .5% Asian. The median age of the residents was 35.5 years. The median household income was \$38,153 and the mean house value was \$77,614, while the median gross monthly rent was \$594.00 (see Appendix J).

Eighty-one percent of those 25 years and older had a high school diploma; 8% had a bachelor's degree or higher; 4% had a graduate or professional degree; and, 6% were unemployed. For the population 15 years and older, 22% were never married, 56% were married, 3.5% were separated, 4.5% were widowed and 13.8% were divorced.

Rural School District

The high school is located in a small, rural farming community in the Midwest. It serves 88 students in grades 9-12. Student to teacher ratio for this district is 14:1. The district is 87% White (not Hispanic); 9% Hispanic; 3% American Indian/Alaskan Native; and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander. Fifty-six percent of the students in the district are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch programs.

Case Study Data Collection

Case study evidence can come from many sources, but Yin (1994) recommends drawing information from six types of sources when conducting a case study:

interviews, documents, archival records, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts (see Appendix K).

Interviews. One of the most important data sources in case study research is the interview (Yin, 1994). A semi-structured interview process was used during this research study. Open-ended interview questions were developed by the researcher and approved by IRB (see Appendices E, F, and G). These questions were asked during the initial interview process with probing questions asked, if needed, to clarify the participants' meaning or to gain greater detail of the questions.

There were several advantages to using this type of interview procedure. First, it allowed the participants to express their views on the subject in their own words; second, interview questions were prepared ahead of time, allowing me to keep the dialogue on task; and finally, the use of open-ended questions allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the topic by being able to ask questions that might not have been thought of previously (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008).

Six participants (two graduates with SLD, two mothers, and two teachers) with different perspectives of the research questions were chosen for this study. Data was triangulated when I compared and cross-checked their interview data to gain insight from each of their individual perceptions regarding these graduates' successes and challenges faced by them as students identified with SLD while pursuing their high school diplomas.

Once consent to participate in the research study was given, I contacted each participant by phone to set up the interviews. Each interview was recorded using an

audio recorder for later transcription. I also had paper and pencil with me so that I could take notes during the interview.

The first participants to set up interviews were Steve, one of the graduate participants, and Sara, his mom. It was decided they would come to my office for the interview session on May 21, 2015, after Sara got off work. Steve elected to be interviewed first. Sara sat in another room during the interview process. Steve's initial interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Steve was a little shy at first, and answered the questions with one word responses. As the interview continued he opened up and began sharing his views. He even re-visited questions asked at the beginning of the interview to elaborate on the short answers he had given at that time. Upon completion of Steve's interview, he left the room and Sara came in for her interview.

Sara, Steve's mom, was very talkative. She gave a great deal of information from conception, to graduation, to what Steve is doing today. Her interview lasted for an hour and forty-five minutes. She was very open about the difficulties she had during childbirth and the subsequent educational problems he encountered once he started school. She gave detailed descriptions of his school years and the successful completion of his transition planning. A narrative of her interview answers is located in Chapter 4.

Debbie, Steve's chosen teacher, contacted me next. We set up an interview time in my office as well. This interview lasted around an hour and fifteen minutes. Debbie had not seen Steve since he graduated and so she could not tell me anything about what he was doing today. She was very knowledgeable about his education from 9th thru 12th

grade and taught many of the classes he took while in high school. She was a part of his transition team and attended every IEP meeting that was held during the years he attended high school.

The next interview I conducted was with Hanna, the other graduate participant, John's, chosen teacher. This interview was different than the previous interviews in that I interviewed the teacher before I interviewed the parent or the graduate. Hanna's interview took place in my office as well. She too was knowledgeable about John's educational career. Similar to Debbie, this teacher participated on John's transition team and attended every meeting conducted while he was in school. Hanna was also a class sponsor during John's junior and senior year, so she was in a position to spend time with him outside of the classroom. She was able to offer her perspective not only as a general education teacher, but also as a class sponsor which, for the most part is a more laid back atmosphere in which to work with students.

John and his mother, Mary, came together to the interview. Mary was a little apprehensive about being recorded so John offered to sit with her during the interview. These were the shortest of my initial interviews lasting approximately one hour for both. Answers given were very short, and John ended up answering for Mary on several occasions. If Mary was not given the opportunity to speak, I would ask the question again in order to gain her perspective.

Once the interviews were complete, I informed the participants that I would get in touch with them, by phone, to set up additional meetings. It was agreed upon at the conclusion of the interview sessions that I would also send each participant a copy of the transcript, prior to the phone call, in order for them to read through the information.

This was done so that they would have time to formulate questions for me and to make sure that the information I had received from the interview process was an accurate representation of their stories.

Follow-up interviews were conducted for clarification purposes. I emailed the transcriptions of each interview to the corresponding participant. This allowed them time to read the transcripts without feeling pressured. Once they read the transcript they were instructed to call me to set up a time to discuss their answers and my initial transcription of the interviews. At this time, no one had any follow-up information. Upon completion of the analysis process, a third interview took place in which credibility was verified by conducting a member check to determine if the themes I had pulled from the data matched what they had said. The third interview consisted of me emailing the final draft of each interview summary and a list of themes to each participant to verify the accuracy of the field note summaries. The participants were given the opportunity to read the summary notes, and determine whether they accurately reflected their positions. They were also given the opportunity to meet with me face-to-face for any other clarification they might need (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004). Allowing the participants access to their comments throughout the collection and interpretation stages gave the analysis of the research a higher degree of credibility and resulted in fewer problems during the different stages of the study (Mertens, 2010).

Direct observations. Direct observations should be conducted in a natural setting. Unless the phenomenon of interest being studied is historical, environmental conditions or relevant behaviors could be observable. Direct classroom observations were not relevant to this study because the participants had already graduated.

Therefore, direct observations occurred during the interview process. I made notes of changes in body language, long pauses, the way things were being said, and also what was not being said during the participants' interviews.

Physical artifacts. Physical artifacts can include tools or instruments, works of art, or some physical evidence that could be relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2003). Sara, Steve's mom, brought work samples from elementary school as examples of his poor penmanship and to provide examples of mistakes made on his papers in the early childhood grades.

Qualitative Analysis

The basic objective of qualitative analysis is to draw meaning from collected data while allowing sufficient information from each step of the data collection and analysis process to be presented in a clear and organized manner (Yin, 2003). Data analysis and interpretation is an ongoing process that occurs throughout the entire data collection process as the researcher reflects on impressions, relationships, patterns, and commonalities (Yin, 2014).

Unlike statistical analysis, there is not a fixed formula to guide the researcher through the analyzing stage (Yin, 2014). I chose to follow Yin's approach to qualitative research in which the phenomenon being studied is well explored and the essence of the phenomenon is revealed (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2014) bases his approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm. He recognizes the importance of the human creation of meaning. Constructivism is built upon the premise of a social construction of meaning. An advantage of this paradigm is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participants while enabling the participants to tell their stories

(Crabtree & Miller, 1999). These stories are the tools in which participants are able to describe their views of reality. This allows the researcher to better understand the participants' point of view of the topic being studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993).

According to Yin (2014) a case study approach should be used when (a) the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions, (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of the participants of the study, (c) you want to cover contextual conditions that you believe are relevant to the phenomenon under study, or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. A case study design was chosen for this research project to analyze how the perceptions of these students identified with SLD graduated with a standard high school diploma and why they were able to achieve this when many other students, also identified with SLD, were not able to do so.

Qualitative analysis consists of examining the phenomenon by categorizing and tabulating the evidence gleaned from the data in order to focus on the propositions of the study (Yin, 2003). The qualitative analysis is usually conducted in two steps (Hesse-Bibler & Leavy, 2006). The first step is data analysis and the second step is interpretation to develop findings. I conducted analysis throughout the data collection process by organizing notes and periodically reviewing data collected.

Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) discuss the importance of the transcription process from field notes or audiotapes. It is important to determine how nonverbal behaviors or other elements of the interviews will be handled. Practical considerations are handled during the transcription process. Field notes and other data files must be

well labeled and organized to assist in data analysis and produce accurate reporting of the results (Mertens, 2010).

Upon completion of the transcription process, the formal analysis process begins with reading all the data and dividing it into smaller more meaningful units or codes. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) recommend using category types such as setting, content, processes, activities, strategies, relationships, and theoretical concepts. It is important to remember that categories are flexible and can be changed or renamed as data analysis progresses.

These coded data segments are then organized into a system that is derived from the collected data. The research questions can be formulated at the beginning to drive the process; however, additional categories or themes may emerge from the data during this stage. The final result of this analysis process is a synthesis of information in the form of a descriptive interpretation of the emerging themes or theory.

I used qualitative analysis for this research study because it uses the participants' lived experiences, as expressed in their told stories (Creswell, 2007). Procedures for implementing this type of analysis consist of focusing on a small group of individuals, gathering data by collecting their stories through an interview process, and then comparing them to understand why these individuals graduated from high school with a standard diploma while so many others with Specific Learning Disabilities do not (Creswell, 2007).

Pre-Data Gathering

In conducting the qualitative analysis for this study, I researched the problems associated with high school students identified with SLD who graduate with a standard

diploma. Questions were developed in order to ascertain, from the individuals themselves, how they became successful students and graduated. Data gathered is presented in Chapter 4 Results.

Data Collection

Throughout the study, data gathered was carefully and thoroughly studied to seek similarities, differences, categories, themes, concepts, and ideas. I then analyzed the logic of previous analytic outcomes, categories, and weaknesses or gaps in the data (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004). Analysis, a reflective activity, required a detailed set of notes that recorded the analytical process and provided accountability to the study.

Six initial, approximately one-hour interviews were conducted, two from high school graduates, two from their chosen family members, and two from their chosen teachers. Interviews were conducted in my office with the participants having determined the date and time of the interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and observational field notes were taken during the interview process for later analysis.

Once the interview process was complete, the audio recorded interviews were transcribed, word for word, into electronic Word documents. Each transcript was re-read and summarized to determine which keywords and phrases were common amongst the participants and which topics generated the most information. These keywords and phrases were then combined into groups under the same coding headings. This initial coding occurred by taking the initial raw data, reading through the transcripts, and arranging the interview questions and answers by topic. Initially, 14 themes were identified: Graduate, Family Member, Teacher, Roles in Success, Active in School, Active in Community, School Demographics, Qualifying Areas, Related Services,

Developmental Delays, Attendance, Accommodations, Modifications, Family Demographics, Pregnancy and Birth, Postsecondary Education Planning, and Struggles Associated with SLD. Throughout this level of coding, commonalities between the participants' stories began to develop. A journal was kept, outlining the recurring patterns and themes in the data for later reference. Another source of evidence provided during the interview process is the opportunity for direct observations. Relevant social or environmental conditions available for observation range from formal to casual activities (Yin, 2014). Observing body language, pauses, how things are said, and what is not being said can add significant importance to interview answers. Sara became very animated and emotional while relaying her story of the teacher who informed her that her son would never graduate. This was not evident just by reading the transcript. Watching her eyes tear up and her voice catch added another element to her story.

Once the transcripts were coded and categorized, they were compared to each other for similarities and differences. A second level of analysis occurred when the data from the initial coding process was consolidated into smaller sub-categories. The data was read through several times to ensure the words of the participants were being categorized according to their meaning from the original interviews. During this level of coding the themes were reduced to 10 by combining similar codes: Graduate, Family Member, Teacher, Disability Awareness, Special Education, IEP Involvement, Accommodations, Modifications, Postsecondary Education Planning, and Struggles of Students Identified with SLD.

Finally, the data was triangulated with my field notes and member checks to discover how the categories and sub-categories related to each other. New findings and

memo references from the member checks were narrated as they related to the implications of the study. This triangulation process demonstrated the relevance of the data and the themes that were developed from the analysis process. These themes are explained in detail in Chapter 4.

Quality Indicators for Qualitative Research

Quality indicators represent the rigorous application of methodology to the research questions. They serve as the guidelines for (a) researchers who design and conduct research, (b) reviewers who evaluate the findings, and (c) consumers who determine the “usability” of the findings. High quality research is designed to rule out alternative explanations for both the results of the study and the conclusions drawn by the researcher (Odom et al., 2005). This allows for stronger confidence in the researcher and the findings of the study. Guba and Lincoln (1989) defined the criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research: trustworthiness, credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity) (see Appendix L). Harry, Struges and Klingner (2004) stress that quality indicator guidelines should relate to the research questions and the conceptual framework of the particular study and descriptions of methods need to be stated clearly.

Trustworthiness

The researcher uses a data triangulation method to determine whether or not the data is trustworthy. Triangulation is a method used by researchers to check and establish the credibility (validity) of a study (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2002). Data triangulation involves the use of different sources of data/information in order to gain

insight on what the participants of the study perceive of the “phenomenon” being studied. Once the data has been triangulated, the case study’s findings are supported by more than a single source of evidence (Yin, 2014).

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research parallels internal validity in quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) explain that credibility ensures there is a correspondence between how respondents actually perceive social constructs compared to the way researchers portray those views. These strategies also ensure that qualitative studies are sound. These practices are used to make sure the audience can trust the research. Clear descriptions of the methods used need to be evident. It is imperative that the quality indicator guidelines relate to the research questions and conceptual framework of the individual study (Brantlinger et al., 2005). There are several research strategies that can be used to enhance credibility.

Triangulation. Triangulation is the principal strategy in the constructivist perspective to ensure validity and reliability. Denzin (1994) lists multiple sources of data as an acceptable type of triangulation for qualitative research studies. When reviewing multiple sources of data the researcher is comparing and cross-checking interview data collected from people with different perspectives and again during follow-up interviews with those same people. By using this cross-checking process the researcher is increasing the credibility of the findings (Merriam, 2009).

Member checks. “The researcher must verify with the participants the constructions that are developing as a result of data collected and analyzed” (Mertens, 2010, p. 106). This is the most important criterion in establishing credibility. Member

checks can be formal or informal. Mertens (2010) recommends drafts of the research reports be shared with the members to ensure that the notes accurately reflect the person's position. Morse (1994) recommends that themes and interpretations are also discussed with the participants so that notes can be corrected and verified if necessary.

Prolonged and substantial engagement. There is not a specific timeline that researchers use to determine exactly how much time to spend on an interview or at a site. Once the researcher has confidence that themes and examples are repeating it is time to leave the field (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004).

Field notes. Field notes are highly descriptive notes taken in the field describing the participants, the setting, and the activities or behaviors of the participants (Brantlinger et al., 2006). They are also used as a place to keep reflections on data, patterns, and the process of research. Field notes are a type of personal journal used by the researcher in order to document the details that form the context and quality control that shape the data into articulated, meaningful, and integrated research findings (Brodsky, 2013).

Participants. Qualitative research participants should be purposefully identified, effectively recruited, representative of the population, adequate in number, and represented sensitively and fairly in the report. Ideal participants are purposefully identified and effectively recruited based on the review of literature and in response to the research questions. They are representative of the population under review as well as being adequate in number. They are sensitively and fairly represented in the report.

Reasonable interview questions. Interview questions are clearly worded, not leading, appropriate, and sufficient for exploring domains of interest. I worked with the IRB to construct appropriate questions for the interview process.

Transferability

Transferability is the qualitative parallel to external validity in quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This is the degree to which results can be generalized to other situations. Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) assert that in qualitative research it is the researcher's responsibility to provide thick description or "sufficient, extensive, and careful description of time, place, context, and culture to enable the reader to determine the degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context" (p. 107). This thick description of the context is important in order to allow the reader to determine how similar their own conditions are to those reported by the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Dependability

Dependability is the qualitative parallel to reliability or the stability of the observed changes over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Change is expected, but it needs to be tracked through the use of recorded interviews and detailed field notes so that emerging patterns can be traced through logical sequences when interpreting the data. Dependability audits need to be conducted in order to attest to the quality and the appropriateness of the inquiry process (Mertens, 2010).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the qualitative parallel to objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This means that the researcher's influence is minimized by providing an audit trail in

which the logic used to interpret the data is made explicit. This allows for the data to be traced to the original source and the process of synthesizing the conclusions can be confirmed (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004).

Ethical Issues

Hatch (2002) summarizes some of the major ethical issues that researchers need to be aware of and possibly address in their studies. Researchers should “give back” to their participants (reciprocity) and be mindful of what participants will gain from the study. Researchers should leave the study scene through a slow withdrawal and convey information about the departure so that participants do not feel abandoned. Researchers should be mindful of vulnerable populations, and not, potentially or unintentionally, exploit them. Researchers should be sensitive to any power imbalances their presence may establish at the study site. Researchers should anticipate how to handle potential illegal activities that are witnessed or heard during the course of the study. And most importantly, researchers must respect the participant. Researchers should use the participants’ language and follow the guidelines found in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2013) for nondiscriminatory language (Creswell, 2007).

Process of Study

Prior to the beginning of the study, graduates, their chosen family member, and their chosen teacher were required to sign an *Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study* form. This consent form outlined the purpose of the research study and explained, in detail, what was expected from the participants. Following obtainment of consent, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant in order to maintain

confidentiality. Consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet. All recordings were destroyed upon completion of the research study, but a record of the consent forms was kept.

All information collected during the study was confidential. Names were not reported in the findings. Participants were occasionally identified in the audio recording of the interview process, but pseudonyms were assigned in the transcription process. There was no penalty or loss of benefits or services due to refusing participation in the study.

Participants were chosen based on the previously stated criteria. Consent forms were filed separately in a different locked filing cabinet in my office at a regional university. All recordings were destroyed upon completion of the research study.

Subjectivity Statement

My work experiences include teaching students identified with all disability categories, supervising paraprofessionals, writing individualized education programs, teaching postsecondary special education, early childhood, and elementary courses; and supervising teacher candidates in school settings. However, during my time teaching in a rural, Midwestern high school I became interested in graduation rates for the students with whom I was working. The school district in which I worked had graduation rates for students identified with disabilities higher than the state and national averages. What were we, as a school district, doing differently that was allowing our students to graduate at such high numbers? I asked questions of graduates, families, and educators in the district to determine why these students were successful when others across the state and nation were not.

One possibility I planned for was the likelihood of knowing the participants in this investigation. In this case, I become an insider researcher. The insider researcher, as defined by Adler and Adler (1994), is one who chooses to study a group to which they belong. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) identified three key advantages of being an insider researcher: (a) having a greater understanding of the culture being studied, (b) not altering the flow of social interaction unnaturally, and (c) having an established intimacy which promotes both the telling and judging of the truth. Smyth and Holian (2008) conclude insider researchers know how to best approach the participants due to their great deal of knowledge of the politics of the institutions, but also how it really works. By interviewing graduates, parents, and school faculty members who I already knew, I hoped to put aside any internal thoughts of being judged by the students or their parents. I hoped they would talk freely to me because they knew me.

Disadvantages of being an insider researcher include loss of objectivity and unconsciously making wrong assumptions about the research process based on my prior knowledge (DeLyser, 2001; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). Porteli (2008) asserts that the basis of educational research is concerned with human beings and their behavior; the researcher's own perspective can produce a more balanced and possibly a more objective account of what is being studied. Disadvantages are minimized by the use of member checks, triangulation, etc.

In order to conduct credible insider research, it is important that the insider researcher has an explicit awareness of the possible effects of perceived bias on data collection and analysis. The researcher must also respect the ethical issues related to the anonymity of the individual participants, and address the issues about influencing

the gaining of information at each and every stage of the research process (Smyth & Holian, 2008).

Chapter Summary and Overview

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions and experiences of high school graduates identified with specific learning disabilities, their families, and their teachers. This investigation seeks to examine why students with SLD from a small rural town earn diplomas at a higher rate than the national average. This study is an attempt to relay the perceptions of the individual participants in this study. It by no means presumes to speak for other graduates, parents, or teachers of students with SLD. My findings are my best guess as to the experiences of others and the efforts to understand their world. Due to the nature of qualitative research the truths reached are imperfect and cannot be generalized to the experiences of others.

Purposeful sampling was used in order to identify participants who fit the criteria of the cases being studied: (a) students from a small, Midwestern, rural high school; (b) identified with having a SLD; (c) placed on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); and (d) graduated with a standard diploma. Additional participants were selected using the snowball sampling process where each of the initial participants selected a family member and a school employee. Interview questions were open-ended in order to make possible in-depth discussions. A qualitative analysis, based on the writings of Robert Yin (2014), was used to determine the essence of the experiences that were relayed to me.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

This study investigated the experiences of high school graduates with SLD, their family members, and teachers of their choosing to discover their individual perceptions of disabilities as they related to the graduates obtaining their high school diplomas. This investigation also addressed the impact of individual attributes of the graduates and the various types of educational services provided by the schools that influenced them in earning their high school diplomas.

The following results sections focus on two graduates, two family members, and two teachers, chosen by the graduates, to answer three research questions. A total of six participants were selected for this qualitative research case study. The graduates were chosen from a small, rural, Midwestern school district. Each graduate was identified with a specific learning disability, graduated within four years from the start of ninth grade, and graduated with a standard high school diploma. Each graduate recruited a family member and a teacher to participate in the study. Both graduates chose their mothers as the family member to be interviewed.

In this study, the data analysis was driven by three research questions:

1. What are the graduates' perceptions of their disability (SLD) in relation to obtaining a high school diploma?
 - a) What attributes do the graduates report having that allowed them to earn a high school diploma?
 - b) How do the graduates describe the types of educational services they received in public school?

What are the parents' perceptions of their children's disability in relation to obtaining a high school diploma?

- a) What attributes do the parents report having that allowed them to support their children while they earned their high school diplomas?
- b) How do the parents describe the types of educational services their children received in public school?

What are the educators' perceptions of students with disabilities in relation to reaching high school goals?

- a) What attributes do the faculty members chosen by the graduates with disabilities possess that allowed them to support students with disabilities while they earned a high school diploma?
- b) How do educators describe the types of educational services their students with disabilities received in public schools?

Each case represented a graduate, a family member, and a teacher. I interviewed two high school graduates identified with a SLD along with a family member and teacher of their choosing. Through this interview process, I ascertained the participants' perceptions of how they overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with their disabilities in order to receive a standard high school diploma (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014) while many of their peers nationwide, also identified with a SLD, did not.

Procedures

Rural Community

This study took place in a rural, Midwestern community. According to the 2010 census, the population of the community was 796 people. This included 434 males and 362 females. The residents included 76.5% White, 10% Hispanic, 8% American Indian, 3% two or more races, 2% black, and .5% Asian. The median age of the residents was 35.5 years. The median household income was \$38,153 and the mean house value was \$77,614, while the median gross monthly rent was \$594.00 (see Appendix J).

Eighty-one percent of those 25 years and older had a high school diploma; 8% had a bachelor's degree or higher; 4% had a graduate or professional degree; and, 6% were unemployed. For the population 15 years and older, 22% were never married, 56% were married, 3.5% were separated, 4.5% were widowed and 13.8% were divorced.

Rural School District

The high school is located in a small, rural farming community in the Midwest. It serves 88 students in grades nine through 12. Student to teacher ratio for this district is 14:1. The district is 87% White (not Hispanic); 9% Hispanic; 3% American Indian/Alaskan Native; and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander. Fifty-six percent of the students in the district are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch programs.

Recruitment

For this study the participant pool included eight high school graduates from a small, Midwestern, rural high school who had been identified with a specific learning disability and were on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) before graduating with a standard high school diploma.

IRB-approved recruitment fliers and names of potential participants were hand delivered to the Midwestern high school from which the students graduated. The school district was willing to distribute the information to the graduates on my behalf. The possible participant list contained eight graduates of the Midwestern high school who had qualified for special education services while in school and who had graduated with a standard high school diploma. Interested participants were not difficult to find because their families still lived in the vicinity. As with most small towns, the secretary of the school or other school personnel knew the location of the families even if they had moved. All contact previous to signed consent took place through the school's secretary. She delivered the recruitment fliers and fielded phone calls from the potential participants.

Several of the graduates had moved and responded to the school that they were not interested. There were also possible participants who never responded to the invitation to participate. Finally, two from the eight potential graduate participants were recruited. Once interested participants were identified, I met briefly with each of them and instructed them to identify a family member and a teacher who would consent to being interviewed for the study. I gave the graduates consent forms for their selected participants. Once I received feedback from the graduates that interested family members and teachers had been recruited, I met with each person and retrieved the signed consent forms.

When I met with the potential participants, I explained the research procedures and made them aware that if they were uncomfortable with any aspect of the study and

chose not to participate, there was no penalty to them. I interviewed only the participants who wanted to participate and signed the written consent form.

The participants were given two weeks to decide whether they wanted to participate in my research study and to determine which family members and teachers they would like for me to interview. I requested that they contact their chosen family member and teacher to gain consent to take part in the research study (see Appendix C). Upon obtaining signed consent forms, I contacted each family member and teacher to set up an interview time and place.

Six participants from a small, rural Midwestern community participated in this study: two high school graduates identified with a specific learning disability (SLD), two of their family members, and two of their teachers. Both graduates who participated in this study were identified with a SLD at an early age and received services beginning in elementary school. The graduates chose their mothers to be the family member who participated in the study. They also both chose a general education teacher who they felt worked well with them during high school to help reach their goal of earning their high school diplomas.

Participants' Portraits

Each participant's story was unique, interesting, and showed the complexity and depth that was presented in each interview. Interpretation of the perceptions regarding the success of these graduates as well as challenges faced by students identified with SLD while pursuing their high school diploma were discussed. Conclusions and implications of these results were also examined or reviewed (see Chapter 5).

John, Mary, and Ms. Hanna

John - Graduate. John is a 21 year-old high school graduate who was identified for special education services in fifth grade using the *Woodcock Johnson III Tests of Achievement Battery*. John graduated from high school with a standard high school diploma at the age of 19. He is of mixed racial descent—American Indian and Hispanic. John was home-schooled the first two years of his school career by his mother. He began attending public school in third grade and in an effort to determine the best location for him, John was placed in many educational settings with peers his own age. It soon became apparent that due to his lack of—what seemed at the time—educational background he was academically behind the rest of his class. The school district removed him from the third grade class and placed him in a first grade class because he was two years behind his peers. His mother did not agree with this placement and even though she had no formal training in education, she withdrew him from the public school system and continued home-schooling him.

John's family owns their own business, so there was little time to spend teaching academics at home. John's father worked all of the time in a business that required him to be far enough away that it was unreasonable for him to return home each day. When John was in third grade there were four children at home. When John started fifth grade, Mary moved with the children to her hometown to be closer to family members who could help raise the children.

John, his mother, and his three younger siblings moved to a small, Midwestern town where John attended public school. According to John, the new school district believed it was their job to prepare students for the technology age. A great deal of time

was spent on the computers, therefore, not much importance was placed on reading instruction. It is noteworthy that John no longer received any special education services during this time. John was also put back into classrooms with his same age peers, and stayed with those peers throughout the remainder of his academic career. The small, rural school district John was attending was in crisis. By the end of John's seventh grade year, the school district had consolidated with a neighboring school district.

The new consolidated school district placed great emphasis on academic achievement. According to the teachers interviewed for this research project, the few children who moved from the closing school to the annexing school had a very hard transition period. It was a struggle for all involved to acclimate to the new school system. Students from the closing school found it difficult to keep any part of their previous identity at the receiving school. It was challenging for everyone, including teachers, students, and communities, to learn to live and work together as one school district. This lack of community contributed to John struggling, not only academically, but socially and emotionally for a couple years.

John attended both general education and self-contained special education classes during his elementary years. Once he qualified for special education, accommodations and modifications were put into place and John felt that "school got easier because they [the teachers] helped me a lot more" (John, personal communication, July 30, 2015). He was pulled from the general education class to a resource room in order to receive assistance in math, reading, and writing. Adaptations were put into place in the general education classroom, but he continued to struggle in the classes where they were not used.

While John was in high school, his mother was involved in the IEP process. She attended annual meetings and voiced her concerns and opinions about John's educational career. She gave permission for testing and signed off on all needed paperwork for him to attend Career Tech. She doesn't remember when he was actually tested into special education, but knows that he received help off and on his entire school career.

John began transition planning his ninth grade year. He was able to attend a field trip to the local Career Tech during his sophomore year. It was determined that he would attend Career Tech beginning his junior year to learn how to weld. Once a plan was in place to have his placement changed to attend the local high school part time, things began to change for John and his attitude improved dramatically. He was not sent home for discipline issues during his sophomore year.

Once John had a goal for his education and was able to attend Career Tech, he took it upon himself to assure that he was receiving his accommodations and modifications in the general education classroom. After he began his classes at Career Tech, he worked extremely hard to maintain passing grades. John graduated from high school and Career Tech. John also completed the 13th year at Career Tech and is currently employed as a welder for a local farmer.

Mary - John's Mother. Mary is a forty-something-year-old, middle-class mother of five— four boys and one girl. She is a high school graduate and attended nursing school at the local university for three years, but did not complete her degree. She attended the local Career Tech while in high school and obtained her Certified Nurse's Assistant (CNA) certificate as well as completing the Cake Decorating course.

Mary and her husband have been married for over 20 years but do not live in the same community for six months out of the year because his work takes him away from the home during that time. Mary mentioned there is an adjustment period when he leaves and again when he returns home. Because of this, Mary has stayed in her hometown for family support to raise her children.

Mary and her husband both have large, close-knit extended families. Growing up, John spent many hours outside of school playing with cousins and being in the company of his grandparents, aunts, and uncles. He also worked on his relatives' farms, which was one reason why he was not involved in after-school activities.

Mary is a stay-at-home mom and spends most of her time taking care of her and her husband's aging parents. They live in a community 30 miles from the town where their children attended school. When John was a senior in high school, Mary became sick with cancer which threw John into a caretaker role, not only for his mother, but also his younger siblings. She took treatment his entire senior year and the year after he graduated. She is currently in remission, but John is still living at home helping out while his dad is working out of town.

Mary followed her husband around the country when they were first married. John started Head Start preschool, kindergarten, first, and second grades in the same school and then Mary and her children moved back to her hometown where she would have help raising the children. John attended school in the neighboring town until seventh grade when the schools consolidated. John then attended eighth grade to 12th grade at the school where he graduated. It was when he attended the Midwestern high

school where this study took place that Mary remembers he qualified for special education services.

John participated in baseball and basketball until his eighth grade year. He was encouraged to continue playing in his new school, but never wanted to participate in high school. Mary came to all of his sporting events, but his dad was always out of town. Mary was a class parent and they were both involved in the class fundraisers and activities. She was a sponsor for the junior class supper and for the senior prom. Mary, her husband, and John attended the class trip after graduation.

John attended all regular classes until his seventh grade year. He stated “at ... my previous school... I was in regular classes. But we didn’t really do school work there. That was right before they closed, and all they had us do was computer stuff” (John, personal communication, July 30, 2015).

John was tested for a SLD his eighth grade year. I asked Mary if she knew what he was being tested for, and she said she did not. John said he thought he was tested because he could not read. Neither remembered meeting with the school to give permission or to discuss the results. When he was tested again his 10th grade year, Mary remembered signing the permission form and meeting to discuss results. John was able to attend Career Tech where he graduated with certificates in Welding.

Mary said things became more regimented when John went into high school. She thought the special education teacher made a greater effort to explain things and keep her updated on what was happening at school. She also related that “I had more understanding [of his disability and the entire special education process] when he got to the high school. The special education teacher explained it more to me and what he

needed help with and what it was about. None of the others ever told me nothing”
(Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2015).

Once John passed his classes and was able to attend Career Tech, his grades improved at the high school. “He loved welding. When he starts something he wants to finish. He has done pretty good since he got to leave the high school some of the day”
(Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2015). Since graduating, John still lives at home and he has been continuously employed. He helps his mother take care of the house and raise his younger siblings because his dad still works out of town a great deal of the time.

Ms. Hanna - John’s Teacher. Ms. Hanna received a degree in General Studies with a specialization in Psychology from a junior college near her home town. She went on to major in Secondary English Education and received a M.Ed. in Education Administration from another regional university. She has been in the classroom for 12 years. She said that she knew she always wanted to be a classroom teacher and had even considered a M.Ed. in school counseling at one point in time.

Ms. Hanna is currently a classroom teacher at a small, rural, Midwestern school. She previously taught in a

...larger, more dynamic school system that had more special education teachers per student that instilled in us a very deep understanding for those students and their needs. They [the administration] made sure that we met those needs appropriately. I was able to bring that [knowledge] with me to my current teaching position. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

Ms. Hanna began working with John his ninth grade year. She remembered he had a very large and tight-knit family that was involved with each other outside the school day. She did not recall John playing sports or being involved in the school play. She believed he was involved in his church and maybe more involved in his hometown community than in the community where he attended school.

She definitely noticed that John struggled academically, especially in reading and comprehension. It was more pronounced depending on how the information was presented to him. She did not teach math classes but assumed that he struggled in those classes as well. She mentioned:

Based on the knowledge that I had of him from other folks that I work with and getting to know him as a person that perhaps his attendance and maybe some behavioral issues that he had when he first arrived, and at his previous schools, kept him out of the instructional environment which I think contributed to his disability. Perhaps had he been more consistently in the classroom and not dealing with some of the behavioral stuff... he would not have been so far behind. There were some issues that I think were always going to be there, school was never going to be easy for him. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

On days that he attended school, John seemed to like the classes where he was not required to sit still and pay attention for long periods. "I taught Speech, and I'm pretty sure that was not one of his favorites because it took him out of his comfort zone" (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015). One of the requirements for

Speech was to get up in front of the class and speak, and “that was not his cup of tea” (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015).

Ms. Hanna also taught Humanities, which was a very art-based class. She described the Humanities class and John’s interactions in it.

If you are not super into who built this cathedral in this part of the world or making your own [humanities style crafts], then you are probably not going to like this class. Unfortunately, I don’t really think that those skills were in his wheelhouse. I would have to say that there were probably subjects that might have interested him more than others, but I don’t think he would’ve said that they were his favorite subject at school. I don’t think school was his favorite. He enjoyed some aspect of Language Arts because he liked the stories and being able to live in that fantasy type world a little bit really appealed to him. Other than that, maybe the hands-on classes of Agriculture and Tech, but I’m not sure. Those classes weren’t super structured, and he got to weld and tear apart engines and things. I know he was really looking forward to attending Career Tech his junior and senior years, but I never really saw him be like jovial, running down the hallway or anything like that. He’s just more of a private person, and he is not extroverted, so I don’t think he was necessarily unhappy, I just don’t think that he was one to show a lot of emotion. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

In closing, Ms. Hanna summed John up in this way:

He is a caretaker; he is a protector; he has provider instincts and since he is the oldest, he takes that well. Whether or not he wanted it that way, he was forced into that responsibility and he didn't shy away from it. In fact, he stepped up to it. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

Steve, Sara, and Ms. Debbie

Steve - Graduate. Steve is a 21-year-old, white, male, high school graduate. He was identified for special education services in fifth grade using the *Woodcock Johnson III Tests of Achievement Battery*. He received related services in speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy in elementary school and continues to have a slight speech impediment today. He is somewhat reserved and very respectful of peers and adults around him. He graduated from high school with a standard high school diploma at the age of 19.

Steve lives with his parents in a small rural community 20 miles north of the high school he attended. He has a younger brother. He and his family are very involved in church and community activities. He currently works at the local Co-Op and is a volunteer firefighter.

Steve was active in basketball, baseball, track, and football while in elementary and middle school. He stopped playing sports once he started high school. He was always active in his church youth group and in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). He never acted in school plays, but stayed involved as a stage hand.

The school recommended that Steve attend pre-k twice, but the IEP team decided to have him complete two years of kindergarten instead. This would allow him

more time to mature before he started first grade. The school he attended had two different kindergarten classes and he was able to spend one year with each teacher. His parents were hoping that this would give him the opportunity to mature and to catch up academically with the other students. He had not been identified with a specific learning disability at this time.

It was during his elementary school years that he was referred for testing for special education classes. He qualified for special education services in math, reading, writing, and related services in speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. He attended the resource room, as a pull-out class, for help with his core subjects and to receive related services therapies. It was at this time that adaptations were put into place for the general education curriculum.

Beginning in the sixth grade, Steve was enrolled in lab classes for Math and English Language Arts. His parents were initially concerned about him being pulled from the general education classroom because they were afraid his peers would make fun of him. This, however, was not a problem. Steve was happier in the lab classes because “everyone had problems learning, not just me” (Steve, personal communication, May, 21, 2015). He was more comfortable with the small classes and the fact that the teacher worked through the material more slowly. The smaller classes also allowed him to know his peers better.

Once Steve was identified with a Specific Learning Disability, he was placed into lab classes for reading and math and received speech therapy twice a week. He was given one-on-one remediation support, extended time, and fewer problems. He was successful in this placement with the provided services throughout elementary school.

Things took a turn for the worse during Steve's freshman year. He was told by a special education teacher that he would probably never graduate. At that point they requested and were granted a transfer, and Steve started school in a neighboring school district after Christmas break.

Steve was extremely successful in the new school. He attended lab classes for Math and English Language Arts and received accommodations and modifications in the general education classrooms. He attended Career Tech his junior, senior, and 13th year. While at Career Tech he was awarded Outstanding Student in Welding and Consumer Math, Perfect Attendance, and Outstanding Attitude awards.

He graduated from high school with a standard high school diploma. During his junior year, he attended welding classes at the local Career Tech and graduated from that program with certificates in many welding categories. He attended the Thirteenth Year Program at the local Career Tech and obtained the National Center for Construction Education and Research certificate in the Construction Technology Program. He is currently studying to take the Firefighter One test to become a full-time firefighter.

Sara - Steve's Mother. Sara is a 40-year-old, middle-class mother of two boys who lives in a small, rural, Midwestern town. Her older son, Steve, was 21 and her younger son was 18 at the time of this study. Steve was a participant in this study. He chose her as his family interview participant.

Sara and her husband are both high school graduates. Sara attended one year of college, but dropped out to be a stay-at-home mom for her children. She and her husband were very active in their sons' school careers. They attended sporting events,

church activities, and school activities and encouraged both of their children to be active and involved in all types of school, church, and community activities. Sara currently works at the local hospital at the registration desk and her husband is a full-time farmer and firefighter in their home community.

Sara reported that she had an uneventful pregnancy. She did not drink, smoke, or do drugs. Steve was due June 10, but she went into labor early and had him on May 24.

He was delivered after 56½ hours of labor. The doctor said that his umbilical cord was clamped off so he more or less was using the nutrients that he already had in his body to stay alive. When he was born they put him in NICU for five days because he could not maintain his body temperature. He, like the other babies in the NICU, were roughly the size of your hand. He looked like an older person with saggy skin and did not have any meat on his bones. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Steve showed some signs of delay while learning to sit up. A physical therapist would come to the house and teach Sara how to work with him to build up his muscles so that he could sit up on his own. Sara did not recall any delay when Steve was learning to walk or to crawl, but she did notice delays in his learning to speak. At first, Sara believed the family was at fault because they would give Steve what he wanted when he would point at the desired object while making an “uh, uh, uh” sound. They knew what he wanted so instead of making him ask for it they just gave it to him. Once he started school, they were told that was not good for him.

He started all-day preschool at the age of four and had a good year, but at the end of that school year the school wanted to hold him back. Sara was hesitant because it seemed to be more a daycare than a school. The kids could come and go whenever they wanted to. “I loved the teacher to death but I was hesitant because it was, to me, it was more of a day care” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). Sara decided to send Steve to kindergarten, thinking that if he was not mature enough, she could have him repeat kindergarten where more learning was taking place. She also wanted him to get socialization with his same age peers.

Steve did attend kindergarten for two years because they began to notice he was having academic problems. “. . . We decided he was not mature enough in kindergarten so we put him back [into kindergarten for a second year]” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). Steve had difficulty staying on task and completing his homework while in kindergarten. He also struggled with learning vocabulary words and could not remember math facts. Sara reported that “it was like pulling teeth trying to get him to do them [math facts]” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). Sara stated that she believed

it was more of [his dad] and I’s decision to make [whether he went to first grade or stayed in kindergarten]. We felt he needed to [stay back]. We felt that, you know, usually boys don’t develop as quickly as girls. We also knew that at the time that year, before, when they wanted to hold him back in kindergarten. I am kind of a control freak when it comes to my kids, I wanna know, I got to be involved in everything. The teachers never mentioned it again but it was our decision that we were

going to hold him back in kindergarten. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Steve's second year in kindergarten went well.

I think that helped him a lot [not having the same teacher two years in a row]. I don't know at the time if we really felt that he was, you know, learning disabled, like we know he is now. I don't think we felt at the time that he was. I think we were just like, okay, let's get him started.

(Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Steve's grades were low so his general education teachers began talking with the special education teacher to find ways to help him. Sara remembers staying very involved, especially before he was identified for special education services, because "she didn't want him falling through the cracks" (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015).

Once Steve was tested and qualified for special education services, Sara told me that just

knowing the fact that he would struggle really hurt. I mean, not the fact that he would need help because his dad and I was willing to do anything to help him, but the fact that he was going to have to struggle to, you know, get through school and to graduate and to make something in life. And knowing that a lot of times it's looked, special needs, special education, IEPs are looked upon as the kids are different and they don't want to be associated with, you know, any other people

don't want to associate with them. So I just kind of felt bad about that.

(Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Steve began receiving help in his early childhood classes but Sara does not remember his being on an IEP until he began receiving help in math in fifth grade. The sixth grade is when he started receiving help and attending special education lab classes and general education classes with modifications and accommodations in place. This was his program until he graduated from high school with a standard diploma.

He had a sixth grade teacher that didn't realize he was on an IEP.

I asked her one day what she [the classroom teacher] could do to help him out. We were literally spending from 4:00 pm when he got off the bus to 10:00 pm doing math. I wanted to know what we could do about it. She [the classroom teacher] asked why he is not on an IEP. Once everyone understood that he did have an IEP in place that cut down on the math problems being sent home. He was able to get more help on his work at school after that. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Steve was active in sports when he was younger. "[His dad] and I went to all of his ball games and track meets. Anything that we needed to do or could be at, we were there" (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). Once he got into high school he stopped participating in sports and got a job working for a farmer in his local community. It was during his high school years that he began having significant academic problems.

He didn't particularly like school because it was more of, you know, books, writing. He didn't like all of that. But if it was something hands-

on he enjoyed that. Like when they had science projects and stuff like that, he enjoyed doing that because it was more hands-on. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

He attended lab classes for English Language Arts and Math and general education classes for History, Science, and electives. Sara again expressed concern that other students would make fun of Steve for being in special classes.

I asked him at times about that and, there, again, he told me that there wasn't any kids making fun of him.... He would even say, well so and so is in special ed and he's popular and they don't bother him. That may have been one of the reasons why they left the kids alone because there were some kids that were, so called, popular ones, and they didn't bother them. We were fine with it because of the fact that the other kids seemed to roll with it and not make fun of him. It was no big deal. As where several years ... prior to that, if you were in special ed you just, well, no one wanted to associate with you. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Steve attended self-contained classes in English Language Arts and Math while at the high school. These were classes in which all instruction took place within that room. He was allowed access to the special education teacher as a resource in all other classes. In those classes he would go to the special education class if he needed help. He was also allowed to study for and take tests in the special education classroom.

When he was in the eighth grade, one of his general education teachers told Sara that she doubted Steve

...would graduate, that he would just get a certificate of completion. And I remember that day it just, that hurt, the fact that he was just going to go through, well I guess 14 years cause you say 12 and then kindergarten and then pre-k – so 14 years of school and just get a certificate of completion. I will never forget that day. It was hard and it made me angry. She just said that she just felt that he would fall through the cracks. Well, to me, that was her job, the school's job not to let that happen to the kids. That is probably the single most reason that we moved from that school system. Well, when he graduated, [it showed me] that the school system was failing the kids and not teaching them the correct ways of doing some type of stuff, say, for instance, English. They didn't know how to write an English paper. We just knew we had to leave. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

They moved Steve to the new school in the middle of his ninth grade year. They visited the new school district right before Christmas. They were told that the special education teacher in the district had a full case load so there would be a meeting to determine whether or not he would be allowed to transfer into the district.

Fortunately, we were able to get with her and she accepted him and thank goodness, because that was the best thing that could happen for him. She worked with him and if he wasn't doing what he needed to do, she would be calling mom and mom would be getting after him. If he thought he could get away with something, he sure tried it. We had to

get him back in line! His high school special education teacher was very special. Honestly, if it wasn't for her he may not have made it. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

I asked Sara if she felt that Steve's disability affected him outside of the classroom.

Yes and no, I think a lot of it is his ability to maybe not necessarily comprehend but to pull all of it in. Like if you tell him about five things to do, he's probably only going to do three of them because he's done forgot the two others. [But] with him having a job that is hands-on doesn't affect him now. Now if he was to do some book work ... I think that would definitely be something ... he just would do. But as far as him retaining what you have told him to do, I think... that does still affect him. He works for a local business in his home town and right now they are fixing to get ready for wheat harvest, so he will be dumping trucks and he will load up feed or whatever. A lot of his job is hands-on and he's learning by watching and doing. In the fall, he will be getting ready to plant wheat, so he will be cleaning the wheat seed. He runs an elevator, and to be honest, that scares me to death because I'm thinking what if he screws up, you know? But I can't always be there and I can't always think that. I know he can do it because he's been [working] there for two years so he knows what to do. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Steve was always a happy person and he enjoyed being able to take the welding and construction classes at Career Tech. He currently is working toward getting his firefighter's certificate and recently purchased his own home in his hometown. He still works for a local business and helps with wheat planting and harvest.

Since Steve had always struggled up to this point in school she was not surprised when they began talking about testing. "I was always so involved so I was probably like we need to be doing something for him. I don't remember like specifically being told because I kind of already knew that he had it [SLD]" (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). Once he was identified with a SLD and placed on an IEP, Sara remembers the school getting in touch with the Guthrie Scottish Rites for vision screening and possibly some

...learning type testing. We felt that from the get go with him being born, not really premature, but, you know, early and with the possible effects, you know from that. We kind of felt that he would have the learning disabilities anyway. But other than that, I mean, I don't know, it was just a lot of testing for him. You know, you just ache because they have to go through all of that. (Sara, personal communication, May 21 2015)

Ms. Debbie - Steve's Teacher. Ms. Debbie was a special education classroom teacher at a small, rural, Midwestern school. She received her Bachelor of Science in Family Relations and Child Development from a local university. After graduation, she worked at a Career Tech Center as a preschool teacher for three years. During that time, she got married and had two children. For the next 15 years, she stayed home with her

children and was a substitute teacher in the local school district. Once her youngest started middle school, she went back to school and obtained a M.Ed. in Special Education and a second specialization as a Reading Specialist.

Ms. Debbie worked as a special education teacher in public schools for eight years. She received certifications and taught lab classes in Math and English Language Arts from seventh grade to 12th grade in one capacity or another. She also worked with students with severe/profound disabilities and their paraprofessionals.

Ms. Debbie worked with Steve as his special education IEP teacher of record and as his lab classroom teacher in Math and English Language Arts for four years. She also served as the class sponsor all four years in high school. This gave her the opportunity to spend time with him outside of the classroom. She describes him as a shy but respectful boy, “he did not participate in anything at school. He was shy around his peers” (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015). She encouraged him to be involved and to participate in the school play. “I really tried to get him to be involved ... but because of his work schedule it just never worked out for him” (Ms. Debbie personal communication, July 28, 2015).

When asked about his attendance, Ms. Debbie reported that he never missed school. “His mother was very conscientious about missing school. All of the kids [in his family] were expected to be there if at all possible. She knew it was a struggle for him to make up work if he wasn’t there” (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015).

When asked about help he received in classes, Ms. Debbie replied that he received adaptations in all classes and he went to lab classes for Math and English Language Arts.

I found that in my classroom cutting back the amount of work and having someone take notes for him worked the best. Just cutting out options and giving him credit for work that he completed in class seemed to help him be successful. He was also allowed to go to the resource room for help any time he felt he needed to go. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

She also mentioned that homework was difficult for him, ...not because he didn't want to do it, but he really struggled doing independent work in most of his classes. He needed the reassurance and guidance from the classroom teacher. Without the help he would begin to fail and once he started failing, his confidence would plummet and it was hard to get him back on track. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Steve was not on the college-bound track in high school but was very conscientious about meeting the requirements needed to attend Career Tech.

Testing [to meet graduation requirements so that he could attend Career Tech] is so important at the high school level, and we had to prepare him for the tests, so that's why the modifications were so important for Steve. We really needed to stick to teaching him what was on the tests, and skip over some of the unimportant part of the curriculum until after

the test, so that he could graduate with a diploma. Also, he needed to be at the Technology Center, so we needed to “adapt” his curriculum to make him successful at the Tech Center and beyond. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Ms. Debbie noted that Steve’s younger brother was actually very smart and very athletic. Seeing him going to all of the general education classes, playing sports, and acting in the school play was difficult for him. He loved his brother and was very proud of him, but he realized the differences. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

When asked if she had any final thoughts, Ms. Debbie responded:

Overall, Steve was just a good kid. I loved him and miss working with him. I think because of all the support he had from home and school, you know, he graduated from high school and he is a successful adult. So for him, the special education program worked. That was our goal, we wanted him to graduate and we wanted him to be successful.

Because of the people in his life, the good and the bad, he was able to overcome and he did it. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Students with disabilities are at a disadvantage when compared to their typical peers graduating with a diploma (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). As stated in previous chapters, the graduation rate has increased over the past couple of decades, but more

intervention measures need to be taken to close the gap between students identified with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

Responses to Research Questions

Research Question 1

The first research question in this study was:

1. What are the graduates' perceptions of their disability in relation to obtaining a high school diploma?
 - a) What attributes do the graduates report having that allowed them to earn a high school diploma?
 - b) How do the graduates describe the types of educational services they received in public school?

Overall my study revealed that the graduates who chose to participate in this study had very strong support groups which allowed them to be successful in school. Not only were their parents involved, but they also had support from their teachers. Sara, Steve's mother, explained that she actively participated in every aspect of Steve's educational process. When decisions about retaining him were raised in elementary school, both his parents had a great deal of input in the decision-making process. John's mother went as far as moving back home, away from her husband who worked long hours and could be gone for many months at a time, so that she could have extended family support while raising their children.

Both graduates revealed that school was a source of frustration and embarrassment. John started off academically behind the other students and spent the first couple of years in public school being bounced from classroom to classroom and

from program to program. During his younger years, he was not even aware that he had a disability. Steve reported,

At first I didn't really know what a learning disability was 'til someone told me...I was upset because the kids in my class was doing better than me and I was like left out because I was in a learning disability. (Steve, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Based on interview data received from the participants of this research study both graduates knew they were struggling in school, but were not aware they had a SLD until they were in middle school. Steve was concerned because, "I had a hard time learning every subject; I was not making good grades. I was paying attention, but couldn't understand what they were saying (Steve, personal communication, May 21, 2015). John couldn't read the words and "felt like people were always making fun of me" (John, personal communication, July 31, 2015).

Steve struggled in school until he was placed on an IEP and it became easier for him. "I was always a shy boy and did not want to be different from the other people in class" (Steve, personal communication, May 21, 2015). He would sit in the back of the classroom, quietly failing, instead of speaking up for himself.

John said that he was made fun of by the other students and ridiculed by a couple of his teachers. Finally, after years of failing and being made to feel inferior, he qualified for special education services and began receiving the help he needed. It wasn't until high school that he learned to stand up for himself and ask for the accommodations and modifications that were required for him to be successful in the general education classroom.

When asked about the types of supports utilized, John said, “I could ask my mom, my grandma, or my grandpa for help...” (John, personal communication, July 30, 2015). Steve commented that, “If I hadn’t have been in special classes, I probably wouldn’t have graduated” (Steve, personal communication, May 21, 2015). As Steve matured and became more comfortable with his disability, “He would go to the classroom teachers and ask for his accommodations and modifications, especially once he felt comfortable with them [the teachers] or if he got a low grade when he didn’t ask for them” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). When asked, Steve agreed that he “would not have stood against a teacher to get things that he knew he needed in class [until he got to know them better]” (Steve, personal communication, May 21, 2015).

Both graduates reported being able to ask for accommodations and modifications by the time they graduated from high school, especially in certain situations [safe environments] and if they felt that it was important to do well on the assignments. It was this ability to know what they needed and to be able to ask for appropriate resources they needed that allowed them to be successful at the high school and Career Tech.

Research Question 2

The second question in this study was:

2. What are the parents’ perceptions of their children’s disability in relation to obtaining a high school diploma?
 - a) What attributes do the parents report having that allowed them to support their children while they earned their high school diplomas?

b) How do the parents describe the types of educational services their children received in public school?

John's mother, who had his best interests at heart, was unprepared to home-school a child with a specific learning disability. With the addition of younger brothers and a sister to the family, and in the absence of her husband's support, she pulled him out of public school and moved back to her home town. Once she realized she was not able to keep up his education, she enrolled him in the local school. This small town school was financially strapped and a couple of years after the family moved back the school closed.

Sara, Steve's mother, commented that "just being able to stay on task and do his homework was difficult" (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). He was unable to learn spelling words or memorize multiplication facts. "It was like pulling teeth trying to get him to do homework" (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). Mary told me that "he [John] never brought his homework home even though I told him to; he was failing everything and didn't seem to care" (Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2015).

Sara was very aware of her son's learning disability and spent time talking to his teachers, trying to make a plan for his education.

We knew, with everything that happened when he was born, that there was a possibility for some kind of learning problems. When he was in preschool we knew he was developmentally behind, but we were hoping an extra year in kindergarten would catch him up. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Sara described her feelings of raising a son with a disability like this. Knowing the fact that he would struggle really hurt. Not the fact that he would need help, because his dad and I were willing to do anything to help him. But the fact that he was going to have to struggle. To get through school, to graduate, to make something of his life, knowing that kids with special needs are looked down upon and treated differently. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Even though Mary knew John was struggling, she was never aware that he was tested for or placed on an IEP until he reached high school. She left it up to him to ask for his accommodations and modifications. She did attend yearly IEP meetings, especially once the Career Tech became involved his freshman year, but provided very little input into the process. She wanted what was best for her son, but she was not comfortable in that environment asking for help.

Sara knew that Steve was having problems in school. She requested a meeting with the special education teacher to see if he could receive help. He was tested and qualified for special education services. But even though that helped in some classes “I literally had to go to a couple of the teachers and explain to them what his problem was and ask them if they would please give him his accommodations” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). When asked what would happen if a teacher refused to follow the IEP Sara said “...However, had a teacher said “no” he would have walked away and not said anything. That’s just the way he is” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). Other teachers were aware of his disabilities and the accommodations

and modifications required for him to be successful and they followed through with what was written on the IEP.

Sara was a strong supporter of Steve, asking for the things he needed to be successful. “I told him to go in before class and ask for those assignments early. That way he could have more time, or he could start studying for the test early” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015).

John’s senior year, Mary became sick with cancer. It was up to John to provide care for his younger brothers and sister. It was then completely up to him to ensure that he was getting the accommodations and modifications needed to not only graduate from high school, but also Career Tech. Mary did the best she could when she felt up to it, but the majority of the time, John was on his own.

Research Question 3

The third research question in this study was:

3. What are the educators’ perceptions of students with disabilities in relation to reaching high school goals?
 - a) What attributes do the faculty members chosen by the graduates with disabilities possess that allowed them to support students with disabilities while they earned a high school diploma?
 - b) How do educators describe the types of educational services their students with disabilities received in public schools?

Ms. Hanna reported that John performed well in the lab classes.

I had no problems with him turning in work and staying hooked up in class, as long as I was using the modifications and accommodations as

outlined in his IEP. I know he did not care for ... certain core classes... but I think the biggest problems were some personality issues between him and the general education teacher in those classrooms. Sometimes he was his own worst enemy. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

Ms. Debbie related that:

Once[Steve]became interested in attending the Career Tech, he began asking his general education teachers to allow him access to the resource room and the special education teacher to receive one-on-one tutoring, extended time to complete assignments, and services of peers or teachers to read information to him. Once he became responsible for making sure that he was receiving the accommodations and modifications that were required, his grades improved and he was able to attend Career Tech. They have a wonderful special needs representative and she stayed on top of what was going on in his classes while he was there. It was very hands-on and it makes such a difference when you make [school] relevant to students with disabilities, turning it inclusive for all students irrespective of differences of categories in regard to their abilities. I think that is why he was so successful at Career Tech. They got out of the high school where they had failed, failed, failed, or struggled. They got over there and it was new and fresh, the teachers worked with them well and they had support from the special needs coordinator. Steve had the

attitude that he could be successful and he was successful. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

The curriculum at Career Tech was more hands on, but Steve still required the use of accommodations and modifications in his classes. He asked for, and was given, extended time, someone to read his tests to him, and the use of a calculator. He was also required to set up a time in the Assessment Center for use of many of these accommodations.

Ms. Hanna said she was proud of the way he [John] turned his school career around and at how hard he worked to attend Career Tech once that became his goal.

He was able to ask for time in the resource room and for modified tests in her classroom when they were not provided. Occasionally he would attempt an assignment without asking for modifications. Sometimes he would be ok if he received the B grade, others he would ask if he could redo the assignment. It really depended on what mood he was in that day. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

One of John's teachers, Ms. Hanna, realized "If I forgot to send him to the resource room to take a test, sometimes he would let me know and then sometimes he might not. I would see his face and quietly send him down the hall because inside he would be freaking out" (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015). But she also noted "if he didn't care about the assignment he would never just come up to me for a daily assignment and say "Hey, you didn't mark these out". She stated that he needed to feel like you could relate to him in some way and that you cared about him as a person outside of school and in addition to how he

was functioning in the classroom. It wouldn't have mattered what you did for him, I don't think. He felt like if you were not for him then you were against him. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

Throughout elementary school and the first part of middle school, Steve's parents and teachers made sure he received his modifications and accommodations. However, after Steve transferred to the new school his ninth grade year, the special education teacher started the process of teaching him to ask for accommodations and modifications for himself. "She had him begin asking for his modifications from a teacher she knew would work with him. The more he asked the easier it got. He then started asking other teachers for things like study guides or notes" (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015). Ms. Debbie let me know that

...when he got to Career Tech he was able to ask to go to the Assessment Center so someone could read him a test or he would ask the Special Needs Coordinator to come to the classroom to help him describe what he needed to complete the assignments. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Ms. Debbie understood that Steve needed it spelled out.

Every bit of instruction needed to be written in a way that he could understand. He was not an auditory learner. He couldn't hear you give the instructions and then just know what to do and go with it. But, once he understood and he got it, he was good. He really needed that

immediate one-on-one help. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

John struggled in the general education classes, especially if he had to stand up in front of the class to talk or present. Ms. Hanna related a story about the first speech he had to give:

The semester he took Speech class, he had to stand up in front of everyone and give a speech. He refused. I gave him several days and several attempts to give his speech. He wanted no part of giving it. I decided we needed help so we went to the special education teacher's classroom and asked for help. It was decided that she [the special education teacher] would come sit in the back of the class so that he could look at her when he gave his speech. John thought that would work, but when it came time to give his speech he backed out. So, the special education teacher, and myself pulled desks to the front of the classroom and sat right in front of him while he gave his speech. We also cut down the amount of time he had to give his speech. He looked at us, and not the rest of the class (we had them move to the back of the class). He gave his speech and really did a wonderful job with it. He was able to give a full speech in front of the class, without accommodations, by the end of the semester. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

Academic problems were also noticed at school by the graduates' teachers. Ms. Hanna spent a great deal of time talking with the special education teacher, "trying to

come up with ideas and suggestions to get him [John] to do his work” (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015). Ms. Debbie spent time before and after school trying to help Steve stay caught up on homework and study for exams. “I was always having a conference with one of his teachers, trying to come up with ways for him to be successful in the classroom” (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015). This was noticed at home. “I know he loved his special education teacher. He enjoyed her [lab] classes because of the fact that he was able to do his work and get help if need be and not be pressured and rushed” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015).

Both teachers attended IEP meetings. Ms. Hanna described how she ...liked to sit back and listen to get information and ideas on strategies to use with John in the general education classroom. She would then offer suggestions on accommodations and modifications that might work for him in her classroom. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

In talking about Steve, Ms. Debbie said that it ... felt like it was important to have all of his general education teachers come to the meetings. Ms. Debbie, the special education teacher, knew the IEP requirements, but the general educators knew the daily running of their own classrooms. It was important for everyone to be there to give and receive information in his best interest. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

The data collected from the interviews revealed rich, robust narratives of the triumphs and struggles of life with a SLD. The participants were able to tell the stories of the graduates' path to successfully earning a standard high school diploma. These included details of the ups and downs encountered by the graduates, the supports provided by their families and the unfailing encouragement of the teachers that they selected to be involved in the study.

Chapter Summary and Overview

The participant pool for this study included high school graduates from a small, Midwestern, rural high school who had been identified with a specific learning disability and were on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) before graduating with a standard high school diploma. Purposeful sampling was used for the initial identification of participants for this qualitative case study. This method allowed me to select participants who met the criteria from which information based on my research questions could best be answered through the use of open-ended interviews and in-depth study (Patton, 2002). Additional participants were selected using the snowball sampling process where each of the initial participants selected a family member and a school faculty member. All participants were willing to share their stories with me, however, some had more to say than others. Interviews were conducted in the researcher's office at a regional university. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded for analysis.

In previous chapters, an in-depth literature review outlining the current data for successful post-school outcomes was presented, including graduation rates of students identified with disabilities. The participants' stories were portrayed, revealing their

individual perceptions by responding to open-ended interview questions based on my research questions. These stories were retold using the participants' own words so that their perceptions of their disabilities, positive attributes, and educational services were outlined in detail and interview data was used to answer the research questions.

Chapter 5 consists of a detailed discussion of the findings, including the eight themes identified by the analysis of the data. These eight themes will be discussed in full and related back to the literature and the research questions. Implications of the study will be outlined as well as recommendations for future studies, limitations of the study, and study conclusions.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of my dissertation study was to provide insight into the life stories of high school students identified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD), their families, and their teachers, and the graduates' quest to graduate from high school with a standard diploma. First, by having the participants tell their stories through an open-ended interview process, I provided them the opportunity to share their perceptions and relate the attributes they believed they possessed that helped them be successful in this endeavor. They also discussed educational services provided by the school district and classroom teachers that enabled them to reach their educational goals and graduate from high school with a standard diploma.

Second, the graduates chose a family member to tell their individual stories about the perceptions they had of their children with disabilities and their struggle to obtain a high school diploma. All participants chose their mothers to be their family member participant. Both mothers reported being very involved in their children's education and engaged in outside family, community, and educational activities. The mothers shared positive and heartbreaking stories of their children's journeys through the educational system.

Finally, the graduate participants selected individual teachers to participate in my research study. Both of these educators appeared to welcome students with disabilities into their classrooms where accommodations and modifications were a frequent part of the educational environment. These educators attended Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and encouraged their students with disabilities to be

involved in school activities. The graduate participants reported that they chose these educators because of the support they provided not only in the classroom, but also on a personal level.

This study utilized a qualitative multiple-case study research design to obtain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of graduates identified with a SLD, their family members, and educators who taught them in school (Mertens, 2010). The use of the multiple-case study design strengthened the validity of my study due to the replication across participants used in my study (Yin, 2003). A thorough literature review, as outlined in Chapter 2, was instrumental in allowing me to think and generate both research and interview questions. These questions were designed to gain intense and detailed information from the perspective of my participants. The use of interviews and self-reports allowed the participants to tell their stories in their own words.

A qualitative analysis process was used to identify themes from the collected data. Initially, interviews were conducted and the audio recordings were transcribed. Upon completion of the transcription process, initial coding began by compiling the interviewer's stories into initial codes based on similar units of meaning. These coded data segments were then organized into a system derived from the collected data based on the literature review. The final result of this analysis process was a synthesis of information in the form of a descriptive interpretation of the emerging themes or theories. Finally, the themes were related back to the research questions and literature review. Results from this process are presented in the next section and the Code Book which is located in the appendices (see Appendix M).

Summary of Findings

Themes

Analysis of the interviews resulted in the creation of eight themes that were directly related to the participants' individual perceptions about students with specific learning disabilities, attributes of the students themselves as well as their families and educators, and services provided by the school that led to the successful completion of high school with a standard high school diploma. These themes include a) disability awareness; b) active participation in IEP process by graduate, family members, and educators; c) goal setting and attainment; d) use of supports: family, school, peer, related services, and modifications and accommodations; e) paid employment; f) self-determination; g) self-advocacy; and h) transition planning/career tech.

The following sections describe in detail the identified theme. This section also provides specific quotes and stories from the participants' interviews to enhance the identified themes.

Disability awareness. The first theme, Disability Awareness, is the individual's self-understanding of their disability and provides the foundation for all other transition skills (Aune, 1991). This process begins with the student's ability to "define" their disability followed by an understanding of the challenges they may face due to their disability (Gerber et al., 1992).

The data collected showed how important it is for not only the students, but also the parents and teachers, to understand the disability. As each participant gained an understanding of what the disability "looked like" in the educational setting, goals and supports could then be added to insure success for the students in the classroom.

In order for students to understand what they require to be successful in school they need to have an understanding of their disability and how it affects their goal attainment and decision-making processes. Both graduates reported they were dependent upon their families and the special education teacher to insure they were receiving the appropriate services early in their educational careers. However, by the time they attended Career Tech, they were aware of the modifications and accommodations they were supposed to be receiving and it was easier for them to ask for those services.

As early as elementary school, John didn't understand why he was different from the other children. He was moved from classroom to classroom while the school attempted to find the appropriate setting for him. He was frustrated and confused and never felt like he fit in.

Mary, John's mother, struggled with learning about his disability. She felt that she was never told anything about it and she never really understood what it meant for John to have been identified with a SLD. "I had more understanding when he got to the high school. The special education teacher explained it more to me and what he needed help with and what it was about. None of the others ever told me nothing" (Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2015). Once she understood what was happening with him at school, it became easier for her to support her son.

Steve reported that he "was having a hard time learning and with tests and stuff" (Steve, personal communication, June 23, 2015). He had a hard time remembering what the teacher said. "I didn't know what a disability was 'til someone told me" (Steve,

personal communication, June 23, 2015). And even more importantly, Sara, Steve's mother, told me

knowing the fact that he would struggle really hurt. I mean, not the fact that he would need help because his dad and I was willing to do anything to help him, but the fact that he was going to have to struggle to, you know, get through school and to graduate and to make something in life. And knowing that a lot of times it's looked, special needs, special education, IEPs are looked upon as the kids are different and they don't want to be associated with, you know, any other people don't want to associate with them. So I just kind of felt bad about that. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Disability awareness is the foundation of self-determination and self-advocacy. This study clarified the importance of understanding what the disability looks like, how it affects the student at home and in the classroom, the modifications and accommodations that work for the student, and that everyone on the IEP team be aware of the goals the student has in place. All of these factors were important in the success of these students.

IEP participation. The second theme, IEP Participation, is defined as actively participating in the decision-making process about the student's individualized education program (Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000). This opportunity for student, parent, and educator to make decisions was found to be crucial in the effectiveness of the student graduating with a standard high school diploma.

Early on, there was a lack of attendance in IEP meetings on the part of the graduates. Not until transition planning took place did the graduates begin to come to the meetings. Unfortunately, Steve didn't come to his IEP meetings until the Technology Center started coming to them.

He was so shy, if he did come to meetings he never participated. As he got older, that got better and by the time he started attending the Career Tech he would talk with [the special education coordinator] to determine which classes were required and to make sure he was keeping up with other requirements at the Technology Center. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Once Steve was able to attend the Career Tech, he was a totally different kid. He was always really good at building things and working with things. His job at home was to help neighboring farmers. If they gave him a job that he could do over and over again he was really good at it. He always excelled at jobs in which his bosses were patient and didn't mind teaching him what needed to be done. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Fortunately, both Steve and John's parents were always involved. Steve's parents were very active in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. They attended meetings and were allowed to share their goals and expectations for him. Sara informed me that once he was placed on an IEP "his dad and I were very involved" (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). She remembers talking about the school's expectations, what their goals were for him and then getting the opportunity to

voice their expectations for their son. “They wanted to know what we wanted for Steve, you know, where we wanted him to be at the end of the year. We definitely got to voice our opinions” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015).

Mary, John’s mother, also stated that she was very involved in John’s IEP and transition meetings and process during his high school years. She was very helpful when John began to fail his history class. That history class failure ultimately prevented his attending the Career Tech during the first semester of his junior year. She remembered attending meetings prior to high school, but did not understand the IEP process at that time. She was unaware that he had been placed on an IEP prior to eighth grade.

Both graduates had general education teachers who took an interest in the IEP process. Because Ms. Hanna was very familiar with special education and the IEP process, she was able to describe the process from the general educator’s perspective.

Ms. Hanna attended John’s IEP meetings and had this to offer:

It is a lot of listening. I always try to pay attention more than talk in those situations because I feel like it is a lot of information that can be really useful to me, especially if it was the year that he was [up] for re-evaluation and there was testing that was done. I always listened to what modifications, if any, were appropriate for this student and then offer up any encouragement... for that student and his parents if it was warranted. For this particular student it almost always was because he was a very polite and respectful kid and even if that’s the only thing you have to brag on, you brag on it. I also like to share a little bit about what I was

experiencing from him in my classroom if it was beneficial. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

Ms. Debbie was aware that Steve was in special education when he transferred to the school. She was given a copy of his paperwork immediately upon his arrival in the school. “We discussed his disability and went over the IEP that came with him to us” (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015). Very soon after he arrived, an IEP meeting was held to make sure that his educational needs would be met in the new school setting. When asked about specific modifications and accommodations, Ms. Debbie explained that “they were written into the IEP so he should have been getting them in all classes. But I know for a fact that was not happening. Certain teachers were better at following the IEP than others” (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015).

Ms. Debbie indicated that she did participate in Steve’s IEP meetings.

I attended every meeting and tried to participate as much as possible. I felt that it was important for his parents to understand what was going on in my classes, what was expected of him in order to pass. That was also the time that I was able to learn about his disability, what it looked like and what modifications and accommodations worked best for him so that Steve could be successful. It worked better for everyone, especially Steve, if he was getting them. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Ms. Debbie also told the following story about a speech Steve was supposed to give in front of the class. As a team, they decided to begin by cutting down the amount

of time he was required to present in front of his peers. They even found pre-written speeches he was able to practice before he was expected to give his speech. “He had to give speeches to pass the class and because of the modifications and accommodations we made for him he was writing and giving full speeches by the end of the semester” (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015).

Unfortunately, not all general education teachers were as supportive. John indicated that certain teachers in his new district made fun of him, embarrassed him and ridiculed him because of his inability to read on the same level as his peers. Because the teachers treated him this way, the students in the district seemed to think they had permission to treat him the same way. He believed he was an outsider and had no support at all within the district. John began acting out, knowing he would be sent home as punishment. This school eventually closed and John was moved to an annexing school district.

There were a few general education teachers who did not follow the IEP. I literally had to go to a couple of the teachers and explain to them what the reason, what his problem was, and ask them if they would please give their study guide to him the night before the test for him to fill out, for him to bring back to them and say yes this is what we need to be studying and then for him to be able to go home and study it. The way they were teaching him or showing him ...was not preparing him for the test. He just did not know what he needed to be, literally, studying. So, finally, after several attempts, we were able to get that taken care of, because

some of the teachers just did not want to cooperate or abide by the law.

(Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

The teachers chosen for this study reported they were active team members in the IEP planning process. They also stated they were familiar with IEPs and the IEP process and used the suggested modifications and accommodations in their classrooms. The more involved the general educators were in the process, the better the students were able to succeed. For those educators who were not involved, both the parents and the graduates were able to advocate for what was expected of them.

Goal setting and attainment. As related to Goal Setting and Attainment, the third identified theme, students who are able to set goals and commit to reaching them are more likely to participate in postsecondary employment and education than those who do not (Gerber et al., 1992). This ability to set goals predicted post-school employment and education “better than IQ, academic achievement, social economic status, and ethnicity” (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 183). These individuals are able to break large goals into smaller more manageable pieces and complete the smaller goals in sequential order (Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

Portley, Martin, and Hennessey (2012) found students in districts that allow students to help develop their postsecondary goals have greater post-school employment and education outcomes. Benz et al. (2000) discovered that students who complete four or more of their transition goals are more likely to be involved after high school and Aune (1991) determined that active involvement in IEP meetings allows students with disabilities to set appropriate goals and determine the smaller steps needed to reach these goals.

The graduates included in this study approached goal setting and attainment early in their high school years when they made plans to attend Career Tech. One graduate was able to attend the Career Tech starting his sophomore year, while the other encountered problems passing a class and had to wait until the second semester of his junior year to begin. Once there, both graduates excelled academically and socially in the new environment. Both commented that Career Tech kept them in school and was a strong motivator to continue to do well at the high school.

Once John had a goal for his education and was able to attend Career Tech, he took it upon himself to insure that he was receiving his modifications and accommodations in the general education classroom. After he began his classes at Career Tech, he worked extremely hard to earn passing grades. John not only graduated from high school and Career Tech but also completed the 13th year at Career Tech.

Likewise, Steve had always planned to attend Career Tech. He wanted to learn to weld so that he could be more helpful to the farmer that he worked for. He made sure he was taking the classes he needed to graduate from high school and also the classes that would “get him into the Vo-tech” (Steve, personal communication, May 21, 2015).

The Goal Setting and Attainment theme goes hand in hand with the Transition Planning/Career Tech theme. Employment options in this small, rural community were hard to come by. Both graduates were employed by local farmers in their home communities (both students lived in adjacent communities, not the town in which the high school was located). This lack of employment opportunities was an important factor in the transition planning process. Choices were limited, so both graduates set goals to attend the local Career Tech in order to enhance their future employment skills.

This turned out to be a good choice for both of them as they now use the skills as part of their post-graduation jobs.

Use of supports. The fourth theme, Use of Supports, is explained as students who learn to seek support from teachers, secretaries, counselors, coaches, etc., while learning skills that enable them to be successful in post-school employment and education (Gerber et al., 1992; Raskind et al., 2002). These individuals are also able to actively seek people and resources outside of their immediate network and thus problem-solve in order to obtain possible support services from community agencies (Gerber et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2003).

The use of support systems has contributed to the improved outcomes of adults with disabilities (Raskind et al., 1999). “Students who received support, advice, and encouragement that came from significant others, including family members, close friends, faculty, or academic support providers” (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 184) were found to have higher success rates in school achievement (Benz et al., 2000). Benz et al. (2000) also found that students with disabilities need educators that encourage their efforts, provide gentle pushing, and acknowledge their accomplishments. Students with disabilities that have a group of positive individuals they can count on for support are more likely to participate in post high school employment and education (Gerber et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2003; Raskind et al., 2002).

Both graduates had extremely strong family supports during their school careers. Both sets of parents were class sponsors and participated in extracurricular activities in which their children participated. Primary

support from the teachers was predicated on having personal relationships outside of the classroom. Their teachers supported them in achieving not only academic success, but also provided a support system for other school activities such as sports or school plays that helped them connect with their peers socially.

Because these graduates had such strong support systems in place, the Use of Supports theme became one of the larger categories of my study. Therefore, this theme was divided into three sub-themes: a) peer support, b) school support, and c) modifications and accommodations. Each sub-category proved to play an important role in the graduates' success.

Peer support. When asked if anyone ever said anything to him about going to the resource room or getting modifications, John responded, “nobody ever said anything to me about going to the special education room. None of my peers ever treated me different or made fun of me for going. They knew better [kind of laughed]” (John, personal communication, July 30, 2015).

When asked if there were elements of school that made him [John] happy, Ms. Hanna replied, “He had some friends that were also in the special education program and they palled around and had laughs and they stuck up for each other” (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015).

When asked how his peers responded to him, she answered,

He was liked by his classmates. . . . He was not a super social person by nature so a lot of his time was just kind of being the wallflower and laughing at somebody else's jokes, but not being the one who was making

the jokes in the first place. But I don't think he was ostracized in any way by his peers. He never liked to be singled out or for anything to draw attention to him. That I feel is one of the benefits of being at [a small] school, everybody knows who is on an IEP and nobody cares. It doesn't have the stigma attached to it that it does in other places. Either because of the way they handle things here or because the kids have really big hearts. It just truly does not matter. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

Sara, Steve's mother, responded that she was worried that other students might make fun of him because he was in special education. But once he was placed, his friends supported him. She felt that was a benefit of being in a small town. "Everyone just seemed to accept him for who he was" (Sara, personal communication, July 23, 2015). Steve never felt like people made fun of him for being in special education. "I liked it better because everyone in the class was having a hard time too; no one made fun of me in that class" (Steve, personal communication, July 23, 2015).

The support the graduates received from their peers made an impact on both of them during their educational careers. Neither felt like people were judging them or making fun of them so they were able to attend the special education classes without fear of harassment or humiliation. Both graduates expressed that the support given to them by friends made being in special education "no big deal" (Steve, personal communication, July 23, 2015).

School support. Mary, John's mother, reported feeling like they never really fit in the new school district at first. She thought the students moving in from the closed

district were treated a little differently than the students who lived in the community. She believed that is why John spent so much time in the principal's office his first two years in the combined district. However, after that time, "He did better at school. I think he fit in better after a while" (Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2015).

Ms. Hanna told me that in her previous position she always felt there were many people she could go to for help if she ever had a question about what a particular student needed. She worked with students with many different disabilities, including those who were non-verbal, individuals on the autism spectrum, those identified with mild to significant learning disabilities, and those identified as being emotionally disturbed. She also worked with a large number of gifted and talented students "who also fall into that special spectrum" (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015).

Ms. Hanna related,

when it comes to working with students with special needs, I feel like I had a lot of resources available to me that prepared me to step into a situation where the teacher that I was working with was very capable and awesome, but the resources were more limited because she had more students that she was responsible for so her time was limited. I felt like I was able to be a help to her and her students in a way that maybe I couldn't have been if I was just starting out in that situation. [Coming from a] ...larger, more dynamic school system that had more special education teachers per student that instilled in us a very deep understanding for those students and their needs. They [the

administration] made sure that we met those needs appropriately. I was able to bring that [knowledge] with me to my current teaching position.

(Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

John's teacher, Ms. Hanna, was asked about his support group at school.

I think he did fairly well moving between special education classes and general education classes. I do not think he was comfortable coming to ask me questions until he got to know me better. I don't know if it was just me as a person or if it was just asking questions in general that was not a comfortable thing for him to do, so I don't know if it was as much that or if it was just me being the general education teacher versus the lab teacher. I know the lab teacher would make him come and ask questions when I was the appropriate person to ask and I was always more than happy to help him with that. I think his comfort level was probably more in the lab setting than the regular classroom setting. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

Ms. Hanna felt she was in a position to encourage him to participate more fully in school activities. "He was a shy person by nature. Once he got to know people and open up he was a lot of fun to be around. I encouraged him to go to his senior prom and to do things socially with his class" (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015). She also encouraged him to participate in the school play. "I don't think he did though. I tried to get him to be a stage hand or something like that" (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015).

Not only did she try to get him involved in school activities, she worked with him constantly on his attendance. She told me that

His school attendance was hit-and-miss. They did not live close to the school, so they had to ride a bus or be driven to school. He would often miss the bus and his parents may or may not have a vehicle. When John and his siblings missed the bus, it was hard to catch his parents to bring them to school. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

When Steve was a freshman in high school, his mother, Sara, was told by one of his teachers that he would probably never graduate from high school. Sara described how this event impacted her:

It just hurt. The fact that he was going to go through 14 years of school and not get a diploma. I will never forget that day or that teacher. It was hard to hear, and it made me angry. She told me she just felt that he would fall through the cracks. Well, to me it was her job, the school's job, to not let that happen to the kids. To me, that school system was failing the kids. (Sara, personal communication, June 23, 2015)

His graduating special education teacher was very special. Honestly, if it wasn't for her, he might not have made it. I remember when I told her that we were told he would not graduate and she said, "That is not going to happen! He will graduate!" (Sara, personal communication, June 23, 2015). Switching districts was seen as a definite positive for the entire family.

Another story related the facts of a particularly uncomfortable situation for one of the graduates.

He [Steve] was enrolled in Speech class his sophomore year and that was very uncomfortable for him. He did not want to give a speech, so I went and got his special education teacher to come sit with him so that we could figure out some things that we could do to make it more comfortable for him. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Both graduates chose teachers for this research study that they considered being strong support. These teachers provided safe environments for all students while providing a solid education. Both Ms. Hanna and Ms. Debbie were active members of the IEP teams and they were knowledgeable, not only about the graduates' identified disabilities, but also appropriate classroom modifications and accommodations. They were not afraid to seek help if needed, and the results in the classes of these two educators were positive for both graduates.

Modifications and accommodations. According to the Oklahoma State Department of Education Special Education Handbook (2014) accommodations are defined as

changes in the curriculum, instruction, or testing format or procedures that enable students with disabilities to participate in a way that allows them to demonstrate their abilities rather than disabilities.

Accommodations are generally considered to include assistive technology as well as change in presentation, response, timing, scheduling, and settings that do not fundamentally alter the requirements. Accommodations do not invalidate assessment results. (OSDE, 2014)

Whereas, modifications are defined as changes to curriculum, instruction, or assessments that fundamentally alter the requirements, but that enable a student with an impairment that significantly impacts performance an opportunity to participate.

Modifications include strategies that change the level of learning expectation. Modifications invalidate assessment results and provide incomparable results. (OSDE, 2014)

The students in this study were provided with varying degrees of both modifications and accommodations throughout their academic careers. John attended both general education and lab classes during his elementary years. Once he qualified for special education, accommodations and modifications were put into place and John felt that “school got easier because they [the teachers] helped me a lot more” (John, personal communication, July 30, 2015). He was pulled from the general education class to a resource room in order to receive assistance in math, reading, and writing. Adaptations were put into place in the general education classroom, but he continued to struggle in the classes where they were not used. According to Mary, once John was identified with a learning disability he went to special classes for Math and Language Arts. While he was in general education classes he received modifications, adaptations, and accommodations, including having someone read to him, extended time, and access to the resource room. He also received modifications, such as fewer answer choices, word banks, and extended time on tests in the general education classes.

More specific examples of modifications and accommodations that were used and seemed to make a positive impact included “attending special education lab classes

for math and Language Arts classes all four years that I worked with him” (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015). He was allowed to take his work to the lab setting when he needed smaller group instruction and also went to the special education classroom to take tests. He was allowed to have someone read the tests to him and he received extended time in a quieter environment. “I believe that he did get modified testing when it came time for the End-of-Instruction exams” (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015).

Other modifications and accommodations used for John included peer tutors, reduced assignments, extended time for tests and assignments, someone to read tests and assignments, calculator use, and time spent in the resource room for additional assistance.

It was generally acknowledged across all participants that most of the graduates’ general education teachers were good about coming to their meetings and sharing which modifications and accommodations worked in their respective classrooms. However, occasionally, modifications and accommodations were not used regularly in all general education classes.

When Ms. Hanna was asked what adaptations were specifically made in the classroom that she felt were most helpful for John she quickly responded:

Removing distracters if it was a multiple choice test...reducing the number of questions on a test because he seemed to get pretty easily overwhelmed if it seemed like a whole lot. He could do fairly well for himself if he didn’t feel like it was too much to do in the time he had to do it... [I also gave him] extended time to take the test if he needed it. It

was also important to know that he needed every bit of instructions written in a way that he could understand them. He was not an auditory learner. He couldn't hear you give the instructions and then just know what to do and go with it. Once he understood, he got it and he was good. It was also very important to have a personal relationship with him. He had to feel that he could trust you. He needed to feel like you could relate to him in some way; that you cared about him as a person outside of school in addition to how he was functioning in the classroom. It wouldn't have mattered what you did for him I don't think if he felt like you were not for him, but against him. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August 6, 2015)

She was also asked if she, as a general educator, felt like the accommodations and modifications were appropriate in the general education classroom setting. Ms. Hanna related that

I provide accommodations and modifications for all of my students whether they are in special education or not....I don't believe any two students learn or function the same way. So, if I see a student that needs this particular modification to help them be successful, even if it is for the short term and then later we don't have to do it that way anymore once they pick up on the concept of whatever, then I am going to do it because it is what is best for that kid. For me, in my opinion, any student that needs to have these modifications or accommodations, that's my job.

It's not inappropriate; it's the only thing that is appropriate for that student. (Ms. Hanna, personal communication, August, 6, 2015)

Other modifications and accommodations that were available for use in the general education classroom included going to the resource room to complete assignments and study for tests, extended time to complete tests and assignments, reduced amount of work, fewer answer choices on multiple choice tests, someone to read his tests/assignments to him, and a scribe to write his words for essays or other writing assignments. He generally attended a stand-alone class for Math and English Language Arts.

Steve was also allowed the use of modifications and accommodations in the classroom. The ones Steve used most frequently in the general education classroom included peer tutors, reduced assignments, extended time for tests and assignments, someone to read tests and assignments, calculator use, and time spent in the resource room for additional assistance.

When asked if she felt like she had a say in which modifications and accommodations were used in her classroom, Ms. Debbie, Steve's teacher, responded, "Yes, I feel like I had a lot of say in what his modifications and accommodations should look like in my classroom. I feel like I got to have a pretty strong voice in that" (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015).

Sara, Steve's mother, remembered the following modifications being in place on homework assignments: reducing the number of math problems, using a calculator, and attending the resource room for smaller group instruction. "Reducing the amount of problems, like if it was several different types of problems and there were several

different problems with those... he only had to do like two instead of six. That was helpful... with his frustration level” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015).

Sara also believed that being able to have the study guides or any assignment in advance so that he would be able to have the teachers go over it before the test was very helpful for Steve as “it helped with his frustration level” (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015). She also appreciated that he was allowed access to the special education room as needed.

Paid employment. The fifth theme, Paid Employment, is described in the following way: students who obtained paid employment during high school are more likely to be employed after high school (Doren & Benz, 1998; Lindstrom, Doren & Miesch, 2011; McConnell et al., 2012). High expectations by the graduates and their parents complement the fifth theme, Paid Employment, which was almost an afterthought of those interviewed. Both graduates were not only encouraged, but required to keep part time jobs while growing up. Both boys grew up in rural, farming communities and were expected to work, not only to complete chores and work for their own families, but also for local farmers near their homes. This rural mentality seemed to prevail in all of the interviews with the participants.

John worked on the family farm and also for local farmers in the area. Once he began attending Career Tech, he began working for the “City”, mowing and providing clean-up around town. Steve worked for local farmers as well and also held a job as a volunteer firefighter. Once he got into high school, he stopped participating in sports and got a job working for a farmer in his local community.

After he graduated from high school Steve began studying to pass the tests to become a full-time firefighter in his community. He still works for the local farmers hauling hay, helping with harvest and planting. One thing that helped Steve get and maintain jobs during and since high school was the completion of two Career Tech certificates: Welding and Construction. Both parents and graduates felt that not having a job was not an option. John also completed the welding program at Career Tech and uses the skills he learned there while working for local farmers in his home town.

Individuals with disabilities who successfully participate in paid employment and further education are aware of their disability but do not let the disability define who they are (Goldberg et al., 2003). The students who obtained paid employment experiences during high school are able to find jobs that match their skills and interests in their communities (McConnell et al., 2012; Portley et al., 2012). The interviews with the participants in my study showed this to be true. Both graduates worked at jobs they enjoyed, went to Career Tech to gain further knowledge of their specific field, and were able to successfully transition to paid employment upon graduation.

Self-determination. The sixth theme, Self-Determination, is defined as the ability of individuals with disabilities to be aware of their strengths, interests, and needs in order to set goals and make action plans to attain their goals (Martin, Martin, & Osmani, 2014). The graduates talked in depth about the things they felt they were good at and also seemed to understand their academic limitations. They were each able to make choices for themselves, with the help of their support group, regarding classes they needed to take in order to attend Career Tech. They were also able to make choices

about what classes were needed once at Career Tech to graduate with not one, but two certificates.

One of the most interesting results of the interviews, in the view of the researcher, was the realization that all three groups chosen as participants of the study were self-determined. It became very apparent while listening to their stories that everyone involved with the graduates was aware of the disability, understood the graduates' strengths and weaknesses, and was aware of and had access to available supports in order for the needs of the graduates to be fully met. This, in turn, led to their successful completion of high school with a standard diploma.

The last semester of John's sophomore year he failed his history class. Because he did not have the credits to be categorized as a junior, he was not allowed to attend Career Tech the first semester of his junior year. This was an eye-opening experience for him in which he learned a very important lesson. He was expected to take responsibility for his own learning, and upon failing the class that kept him out of Career Tech, he began making sure he was completing assignments on time.

Ultimately, both graduates were able to take responsibility for their own learning, education, and employment opportunities. Because their support teams were also self-determined, the boys were able to learn what supports were available to them and how to navigate the supports in order to successfully complete high school with a standard diploma. They also attended the appropriate Career Tech programs that led to employment upon graduation from high school.

Self-advocacy. As for the seventh theme, Self-Advocacy, this is the learned process for individuals with disabilities to understand their disability, know their

learning strengths and weaknesses, know what resources are available to them, and know how to advocate for themselves in order to be successful (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Brinckerhoff et al., 2002; Lock & Layton, 2001). The process of self-advocacy begins with self-determination and ends with empowerment for the student (Field & Hoffman, 1996). The participants' narratives in this chapter revealed that learning process. When first identified, the students were not aware of what having a learning disability meant and by the time they graduated they were asking for modifications and accommodations from their support groups. Even post-school one of the graduates reported that he could ask for additional help from his boss if he did not understand what was asked of him.

Once John failed the history class and had to wait a semester to begin Career Tech, he realized there were consequences to his actions. He really buckled down and made up that credit so that he was able to begin welding classes after winter break. Steve and Sara were good at keeping up with what he was receiving and what he was not, and asking for things that he needed to be successful in the general education classroom. Self-determination and self-advocacy are both integral to students identified with disabilities becoming successful, contributing adults upon graduation.

Transition planning/career tech. Finally, the eighth theme that emerged from this study was transition planning. Providing opportunities for students to participate in occupationally-specific courses, participation in paid work experiences, competence in functional academics, community living, personal-social and self-determination skills, and participation in transition planning make up the activities for successful transition planning (Benz et al., 1997; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Halpern et al., 1995; Heal &

Rusch, 1995; McGrew et al., 1992; Wagner et al., 1993; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

The graduates in this study were able to successfully navigate through these skills and activities in order to complete their high school degrees, both at their regular high school as well as Career Tech.

These graduates were chosen to participate in my study because they successfully completed high school with a standard high school diploma even though they were identified with having a SLD. It was important to me to understand why they were able to overcome their disabilities and graduate with a standard diploma. As shown with previous literature, these nonacademic behaviors are good indicators of successful post-school outcomes and these graduates help to strengthen the case made by those previous studies.

John began transition planning his ninth grade year. He was able to attend a field trip to the local Career Tech during his sophomore year. It was determined that he would attend the local technology center beginning his junior year to learn how to weld. Once a plan was in place to have his placement changed to attend the local high school part time, things began to change for John and his attitude improved dramatically. He was not sent home for discipline issues during his sophomore year, but he had to overcome one more school-related issue before he could attend Career-Tech, passing history.

Once John passed his classes and was able to attend the Career Tech Center, his grades improved at the high school. “He loved welding. When he starts something, he wants to finish. He has done pretty good since he got to leave the high school some of the day” (Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2015). Since graduating, John

completed two programs at Career Tech: he earned the Welding certificate, along with all of the certifications that go along with that program, and the Small Diesel Mechanic certificate.

Transition meetings started upon his arrival in the new district. His transition plan included attending the Welding classes at Career Tech and keeping a part-time job after school. Steve decided to attend Career Tech his ninth grade year after they took a field trip to the facility to see what courses were offered. He decided early on that he wanted to weld.

Steve attended Career Tech half a day his junior and senior year, he did welding and he got a completion and certificate for that. His 13th year he went a full day for the whole year of construction work and he graduated from that program and got a certificate. It was mainly hands-on, with a couple of math classes that he had to take his junior and senior year. I think Career Tech was good because he was able to get the special accommodations that he needed. Being in the regular classroom would not have been good because of the fact that they are so quick. They are onto a different subject or different question, or whatever, and he is still on the first one. So, with him having an IEP and getting those accommodations he kind of got to set his own pace instead of not letting him do anything. He loved going out there his thirteenth year because a lot of it he would help other kids. He was able to help them because he had been there all day long so he was able to help the afternoon kids learn or do whatever he did that morning. He really enjoyed helping and

having the hands-on...High school was more books and reading and writing, and that is not his thing. (Sara, personal communication, May 21, 2015)

Ms. Debbie had this to say:

Steve worked so hard his ninth and 10th grade years so that he could attend Career Tech. Once he got there he thrived. They (Career Tech) have a wonderful special needs representative and she stayed on top of what was going on in his classes while he was there. It was very hands-on. It makes such a difference when you make [school] relevant to students with disabilities, really with all students. I think that is why he was so successful at Career Tech. They got out of the high school where they had failed, failed, failed, or struggled. They got over there and it was new and fresh, the teachers worked with them well and they had support from the special needs coordinator. Steve had the attitude that he could be successful, and he was successful. The whole Career Tech system is set up differently than the high school. It is much more hands-on and more learning by watching and doing. It eliminated a lot of their disabilities because they utilized that different style of learning at Career Tech and that leveled the playing field. It no longer mattered that he was a slow reader because they were learning the lessons by doing the lessons and then repeating them over and over and over until they became proficient at the task. (Ms. Debbie, personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Career Tech played a very important role in the successful completion of high school for both graduates. Once completed, the transition process in this small, rural, Midwestern community relied heavily on the graduates passing the curriculum provided at Career Tech. This ultimately provided them with the knowledge and resources to obtain post-graduate, paid-employment.

John, Mary, and Ms. Hanna Summary

I found John's story to be both interesting and heartbreaking. He came from a close-knit family who was not prepared to meet the educational needs of a child with learning disabilities. Although his mother, Mary, tried to give him an appropriate education at home during his early elementary years, she was ill-equipped to teach him. Because of her obligations as sole caretaker of the family of four children, with John being the oldest, she was unable to meet his educational needs at home.

Another problem John and his family faced was the lack of educational services in the school setting. Mary's hometown was small and had a rural school that consolidated with a neighboring school and eventually closed. During the years that John attended this school, he was mainstreamed with no accommodations, adaptations, or modifications in place. In fact, most of the instruction given at this school was done on a computer with very little supervision. Upon the consolidation of the schools, John was re-tested to determine his present levels of performance, and he was enrolled into both special education and general education classes deemed to meet his educational needs.

Once John began attending the new high school, he worked with teachers who were knowledgeable about his disabilities and provided appropriate accommodations,

adaptations, and modifications in order for him to succeed. The majority of his teachers worked with him and the special education teacher to provide an education that met his academic goals. He was also given the opportunity to attend the local Career Tech. He thrived in his new environment, graduated with honors from the Career Tech, and was able to obtain his high school diploma.

Steve, Sara, and Ms. Debbie Summary

Steve is the older of two children. He was born prematurely and was identified with developmental and academic problems early in life. His younger brother does not have learning disabilities. Both of his parents were very proactive in getting help for him early on.

Even though he attended a small, rural, Midwestern school, his teachers were aware of his difficulties and kept in contact with his parents about special education placements and supports. He was identified and placed on an IEP. He also received early intervention services that included speech therapy. By the time he started kindergarten it was obvious he was struggling. He was held back for a second year of kindergarten and began receiving help in his classes, specifically math and reading.

Steve moved to his graduating high school the spring semester of his ninth grade year. He had been told by his previous special education teacher that he would never graduate. This was not acceptable to him or his parents so the decision was made to transfer into the new school district.

Steve struggled academically throughout high school but he had a strong work ethic and teacher and parent support to help him succeed. He attended Career Tech during his junior, senior, and 13th years and was very successful in the Welding

program. He proved to be a leader at Career Tech and was able to graduate with honors from Career Tech and obtain his high school diploma.

Implications of this Study

The findings of this study could be a potential starting point for districts seeking to improve policies, programs, and interventions for students identified with SLD. These improvements could be an important aid to keep identified students in school and also help them reach their educational goals and receive a standard high school diploma.

One implication of this study is the need for a strong IEP team in place to ensure that the students, their family members, educators, and resource providers are invested in the process of helping students reach their educational goals as soon as they have qualified for special services. As the students' progress through school, the IEP team helps prepare the students identified with SLD for further education, employment, and, as necessary, independent living skills so they can successfully develop to their fullest potential and contribute to society to the best of their abilities.

A second implication of this study is the need for supports to be put into place early. These students needed the support of their families and educators early on in their academic endeavors. Supports were required to set and reach academic goals, provide continuing education for educators who were not familiar with IEPs, and support extracurricular activities with nondisabled peers. Another aspect of the support theme was the use of appropriate accommodations and modifications in the classroom.

The general education teachers, who attended IEP meetings regularly and also contributed to the IEP process, were a better support for these students with SLD than

those teachers who were not involved in the IEP process. Also, by attending the IEP meetings, communication was strengthened between the school, parents, and students. This allowed for much smoother problem solving when disagreements occurred and kept everyone on the same page regarding how educational goals were being met.

Disability awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy were very important factors in the participants' school life. Identified students must be aware of their disabilities, what that means for them, and learn how to navigate the school system as it relates to their disabilities. Once they develop an understanding, it is easier for them to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This understanding is an important step in becoming a self-advocate. Students who are not self-aware and do not understand their disability or what they need to be successful do not have the necessary tools required to ask for the resources they need. Strengthening self-determination skills enables students to be more involved in their education and transition goal attainment. It is imperative that we, as educators and parents, allow the students to understand their disabilities and teach them to ask for the supports they need to be successful.

Pre-graduation, paid employment for these graduates was an expected part of their daily lives. Post-graduate, college education was not expected for either graduate. Both boys wanted to graduate from high school and Career Tech, move to their hometowns, and gain employment within those communities. It was not a question of whether or not they would work, but where. As reported in Chapter 2, the research shows that this is an important factor in successful post-school outcomes and seemed to be so for these graduates. Students who obtained employment during high school were more likely to be employed after high school (Doren & Benz, 1998; Lindstrom et al.,

2011; McConnell et al., 2012). Students who expressed a desire to obtain a job and then actively looked for a position using effective job search skills experienced higher rates of successful post-school employment (Benz et al., 2000). Students with disabilities who participated in work-study or vocational education (Benz et al., 1997) increased the likelihood of full-time employment upon completion of high school. And finally, students who had paid employment experiences during high school were able to find jobs that matched their skills and interests in their communities (McConnell et al., 2012; Portley et al., 2012).

Rural education values played a large part in the successful completion of high school for these students. Corbett (2009) documented that rural education promotes and provides the necessary intellectual, social, and geographic mobility opportunities to rural youth. This was shown in this school district because, due to the lack of things to do outside of school during the day, these students came to school. School is where their friends were. Also, because everyone in town knew everyone else in town, there was no way for these students to blend in outside of school during the day. This is one of the benefits of small town communities. Since there was nothing else to do, these students were in school every day.

Finally, one of the most important factors for these students was having strong transition teams whose members shared knowledge of their professional fields and the possible influence this could have on the students. Starting with family members who supported their need for education, the graduates had people at home that were watching their grades and discipline issues to ensure they stayed on the appropriate path. General education and special education teachers came together to develop

classroom-appropriate academic and behavioral goals for these students. The educators helped the graduates modify those plans to meet their evolving postsecondary goals. Finally, the Career Tech staff came prepared with ideas and suggestions to assist in goal attainment for them while away from the high school. All of these components worked together to ensure the graduates were successful in whatever educational or career path they chose to take.

While the dropout rate has decreased for students identified with SLD over the last decade (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014), this group continues to remain at significant risk of not graduating with a standard diploma. Perceptions of the graduates, family members, and educators in this study showed that involvement of all three groups was an important factor in the successful completion of high school with a standard diploma for these students identified with SLDs. Other factors found in this study that led to the successful completion of high school were effective and age-appropriate instructional programs taught by caring teachers who understood the intricacies of working with students with specific learning disabilities.

Recommendations for Future Study

This study focused on understanding the perceptions of high school graduates who qualified for special education services due to a SLD, their families, and their educators. All of the participants lived in a small, rural, Midwestern town. Further, replication studies should be conducted in similar school districts and also large urban districts to determine if the outcomes of the study are affected by the size of the school district and/or location. Additionally, more interviews should be conducted to include larger numbers of graduates, family members, educators, and related service providers

to increase the richness and robustness of the study as well as the generalizability of the data collected and analyzed.

Further studies should also include a closer look into the Career Tech programs. Smaller, rural school districts are at a disadvantage for transition opportunities for students identified with learning disabilities. Of the participants in my study, three were Career Tech graduates, both high school graduates and Mary, John's mother. Career Tech offered the graduates the opportunity to learn a trade, allowed them both to attend their 13th year so they graduated with two certifications, and gave support to the graduates to stay in high school to obtain their standard diploma.

More general education teachers should be interviewed, including those who are supportive of students with disabilities in their classrooms and those who are not. Educators need an understanding of what works well with this population of students and also how to identify strategies, accommodations, and modifications to employ in their classrooms to help these students be successful. Data also needs to be collected to understand why some teachers do not want to work with this population and what can be done to make this less difficult for these educators.

Finally, ascertaining teacher background as it relates to special education so that knowledge can be gained into their abilities to support and advocate for students with disabilities. Both graduates chose teachers with a working knowledge of special education laws and procedures to participate in this study. They liked these teachers and seemed to feel they had a desire to help them succeed. It would be interesting to see if this aspect of the study transfers to other success stories.

The teachers chosen for this study had an impact on the success of these graduates. They were cheerleaders as shown by their push to keep these students involved. They were drill sergeants as shown by their never-ending push to keep them in the general education high school as well as Career Tech. Finally, they were friends in the sense that they developed professional, yet supportive relationships with these students.

Communities

Future studies would take place in communities surrounding the original study site. There are several school districts of varying sizes and rural/urban makeups that could be potential study sites.

Recruitment

I would send out the same recruitment letters used in this study to the individual high schools in the area to recruit future participants. The following criteria would still be used to select the participants for this study; (a) identified with having a SLD, (b) placed on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and (c) graduated with a standard diploma. Additional participants would be selected using the snowball sampling process where each of the initial participants would select a family member and an educator.

The potential participants would be given two weeks to decide whether they wanted to participate in my research study and to determine which family members and teachers they would like for me to interview. I would request that they contact their chosen family member and teacher to gain consent to take part in the research study (see Appendix C). Upon obtaining signed consent forms, I

would contact each graduate, family member and teacher to set up an interview time and place.

Information that I would like to explore in greater depth is the choices these graduates felt like they had when deciding transition opportunities. Were they interested in attending college? Were there other options given to them besides Career Tech? What other programs had they explored? I am also interested in knowing how they decided which program to attend if Career Tech was the only? Choice they made? While other sources of school or career development were not important to this particular participant pool, it would be interesting to explore the goals of other future graduates identified with SLD.

Limitations of the Study

The phenomenon being investigated was anchored in real-life situations and the data collected resulted in a rich and holistic account of said phenomenon. The insights garnered through this research design created meanings that expanded the reader's experiences. These insights can, in turn, be the basis of knowledge to help structure future research. Case study has proven to be useful in the field of education because programs, problems, and processes can be examined. Program understanding can lead to improved practice in the classroom (Reis, 2009).

The same features of case study research that provide the rationale for its use also present certain limitations. Because thick, robust description and analysis are required when conducting case study research, researchers may not have the time or desire to devote to the task at hand. Further limitations include issues of reliability,

validity, and generalizability (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993). Researchers who argue for qualitative case studies maintain that

The strength of qualitative approaches is that...they do not attempt to eliminate what cannot be discounted. They do not attempt to simplify what cannot be simplified. This is precisely because case study includes paradoxes and acknowledges that there are no simple answers that it can, and should, qualify as the gold standard. (Shields, 2007, p. 12)

While this study could contribute to the current literature detailing the perceptions of graduates, family members, and educators, it is impossible to collect data on every individual in a specific group. There are 2.2 million students in the United States identified with having SLD. A case study methodology was used for this research study because it allowed me to study, in depth, the perceptions of my participants using an open-ended interview process across settings, home and school, and across participant groups, graduates, family members, and educators (Creswell, 2007). This method was appropriate in that the problem being studied dealt with the individuals' shared lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of the study was to allow the participants to describe "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). However, the small participant size and the general differences of all students identified within the SLD category make generalization of the results impossible.

Another limitation was that of sampling. Mertens (2010) contends that sampling is relatively flexible in qualitative research. I chose participants according to criteria based on a review of literature and the emerging research questions. In qualitative

research the views and beliefs of participants in a study do not necessarily transfer to the views and beliefs of all members of the interviewed groups (Mertens, 2010).

Purposeful sampling was used for the initial identification of participants for this research case study. This method allowed me to select participants from which the most could be learned by choosing the most information-rich cases in which to conduct an in-depth study (Patton, 2002). These participants were selected based on the following criteria (a) students from a small, Midwestern, rural high school, (b) identified with having a SLD, (c) placed on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and (d) graduated with a standard diploma. Additional participants were selected using the snowball sampling process where each of the initial participants selected a family member and an educator.

Hopes for the Future

I became acquainted with six very inspirational people while conducting this study. These six participants became more than just participants. The students became individuals that I want to remain in contact with so that I can monitor how they continue to grow and, hopefully, prosper. I also want to stay in touch with their parents in order to discuss further accomplishments and challenges that these young men experience throughout the years. Fortunately, the teachers in this study have both agreed to allow me to be involved in their classrooms as part of my professional development. They have also indicated that I may monitor future special education students with whom they work. This would allow me the opportunity to stay in touch with changes in special education procedures in the general and special education classroom. This would allow

me the opportunity to obtain original research that would fuel some of my teaching, mentoring and professional development of future educators.

At the time of this writing, three years have passed since graduation. Both boys are living in their hometown communities. Steve, with the help of his parents, has purchased his own home. John, on the other hand, has continued living with his parents. The young men are both gainfully employed: Steve as a firefighter and farmer; John, as a farm worker within his community.

Sara, Steve's mom, has changed jobs and is now working closer to home. She and Steve's father have maintained an excellent relationship with their son. They have been, and will continue to be, his biggest supporter. Mary, John's mother, is currently in remission from her various bouts with cancer. John has elected to stay home so that he can help take care of her and his brothers and sisters.

Hanna and Debbie continue to work in the study district. They continue working to uphold the standards they set during their time working with the study graduates. Both continue to welcome and support students with and without disabilities to help these students become contributing adults upon graduation from high school.

As for myself, I am truly interested in staying in contact with my participants to see what becomes of them in five years and ten years. Will the education they received in high school and career tech benefit each of them in the future? If so, in the same ways? Will they be able to provide for themselves? What will their future families be like? Does having a disability hinder their job and or family prospects? And if so, how? And if not, why? Now that the days of having an Individual Education Program (IEP) are behind them, does that still affect the day to day aspects of their lives? Does having

a disability carry the stigma in adulthood that both of their parents were so afraid of in high school? I have so many unanswered questions that only time can answer. I hope I have the opportunity to watch and learn as they each continue through their life's journey.

What will the journey for these families look like? Both invested a great deal of time and effort to the raising of their children. The struggles and the victories were felt throughout the entire family system. How will the graduation and ultimate independence that comes with it affect the family dynamics? Both graduates had instilled in them a very strong sense of family. Will it continue once they are able to venture out on their own? Knowing these families, I truly believe it will.

I believe that many good things were brought about with the passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative: inclusion, accountability, and highly qualified teachers to name a few. Students who qualify for special education services are no longer being taught in portable buildings located behind the football field. For the most part, they have been moved into classrooms in the main building and are attending classes taught by highly qualified teachers. Though I do not agree with every aspect of NCLB, most notably high stakes testing, I do think the changes created were positive changes for the education of students identified with disabilities.

These alterations in education have produced many remarkable improvements, not only in educational practices, but also in graduation rates across the country. These differences have enabled students who previously were denied access to public schools and opportunity to access educational opportunities that prepared them for life after

high school. These opportunities included education, employment, and, as appropriate, independent living opportunities.

Concerns

Even though such positive changes in special education are apparent in the collected data, I am encountering a disturbing phenomenon in the field of special education today. As evidenced in classes I teach at a regional university, the number of pre-service teachers enrolling in special education courses has greatly decreased over the last several years. This lack of interest or commitment in the field of special education should guide future research in order to identify the cause(s) of this phenomenon and, hopefully, to generate interest by quality teachers in special education as a career path.

As a result of this decline in enrollment, alternative certification paths to becoming special education teachers are being approved by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. While I agree that these alternative programs are important to fill a void in public schools, I worry that the quality of special education teachers who are completing these programs might be compromised. One reason for my concern is the knowledge that many school districts are forcing general education teachers out of their classrooms and into these alternative certification programs in an effort to fill a need within the districts. Some of the general educators leave their classrooms willingly, others do not.

While working with these displaced general educators, I notice that some express a great deal of anxiety and uneasiness about working with students who have disabilities. While most seem to have a passion for teaching, they appear very unsure of

their future roles and voice concern over this fast route to special education certification. Since most of these programs are online, hands-on activities and face-to-face time with professors is limited or non-existent. Even though I understand that this is necessary in today's educational system, are quality educators actually being produced in such a short amount of time with such limited opportunities to learn through conversations with their peers and professors? What will the education of students with disabilities look like over time? Will these fast-tracked educators have the skills required to provide appropriate instruction to students who need knowledgeable educators? Will they stay active in the field?

These are questions that can only be answered by the passage of time. It will be interesting to see how teachers new to the field of special education who did not choose special education as an original career path, are thrust into their own special education classes after just ten hours of college credit. Are they truly receiving ample education in those ten hours to work effectively with students who have special needs? Even though taking additional coursework and passing certification tests are required over the next three years, are we initially doing these teachers and students an injustice by providing this fast track education?

Not having sufficient special education teachers is a problem that many school districts across the state are facing. The alternative route to special education certification is helping to fill a need caused by teacher shortages. It is my hope that these displaced teachers will receive the training and support needed to provide quality education for students identified with disabilities.

The loss of quality special educators to other states and the impact of pre-service teachers not going into the field of special education are having a negative influence on the educational opportunities for students in Oklahoma. How do we impress upon the legislature the importance of high quality special education teachers in our classrooms? How do we make them see the importance of paying teachers an appropriate salary to keep them in our schools so that we produce educated individuals with disabilities? It is my hope that within the next five years all educators will receive the pay increase they so desperately deserve to keep them in the Oklahoma education system.

Considerations for This Study

As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, I was familiar with the participants of this study prior to interviewing them. I view this as both a benefit and a challenge of my study. While I think this helped the graduates and parents feel more secure in sharing their stories, I also feel like I was asking for personal information they might not have been comfortable in sharing with a former teacher. I was familiar with their specific learning disabilities and knew of the hardships each had encountered while in school. I also knew of and was able to participate in their triumphs as they occurred. However, there were many feelings they relayed to me during the interview process that I was not aware of at the time. I was not privy to their collective background stories, and they had never shared in full their exact reasons for moving into the district. Through the interview process I feel that I have a much stronger knowledge of their struggles and successes than I did before.

Another consideration for future study that could add more clarity to this study is to explore choices for post high school college opportunities. These particular

students were not interested in attending college and the certificates they received from the Career Tech allowed them to move home and obtain employment in their home communities. While other sources of school or career development were not important to this particular participant pool, it would be interesting to explore the goals of other future graduates identified with SLD.

Conclusion

The successful completion of high school is a goal of many Americans. High school diplomas hold a social as well as economic value in today's society. Studies document the correlation between high school graduation and transition to continuing education, post-school employment, and as needed, independent living (Benz et al., 2000; Kochhar-Bryant et al., 2007). As cited in Chapter 1, 68% of the 2.2 million students identified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) graduate with a standard high school diploma. This has long lasting effects on the college and career possibilities of these students identified with SLD which, in turn, is a factor in the unemployment rate of 46% for these adults (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

These numbers are too high. Students identified with SLD make up the largest identified category (35%) eligible for special education services (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Far too many students identified with SLD are dropping out of school or receiving a certificate of completion instead of a standard high school diploma. Unfortunately, neither of these options provides these students a practicable pathway to meaningful employment or to a higher education. Data collected through surveys indicates students with disabilities are often misunderstood and held to low expectations by their teachers as well as their parents (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Today's society dictates that a diploma is a necessity for economic stability. It is imperative, therefore, to determine why some students identified with SLD are able to succeed, to graduate with a standard diploma, while others do not. Policy makers, school leaders, parents, and the students themselves must use information found in today's research studies to identify and, in turn, transform schools so that these identified students graduate with a standard diploma. James H. Wendorf, Executive Director of the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD; 2014), asserts students need to develop their own high expectations and deserve to have educators who create an environment that supports those educational goals (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

I ultimately found that all of the themes and implications identified in my study are pieces of the same puzzle that fit together to create an overall success rate for students identified with disabilities. This study emphasizes the invaluable factors that lead to high school graduation with a standard diploma. Graduates, family members, and educators play an important role in guiding students with disabilities down a path toward successful high school completion. While I understand the results of this study cannot necessarily transfer to other students identified with SLD, their families, or educators, I feel this study will add to the current existing knowledge already in place for students with SLD.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letters



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Approval of Initial Submission – Expedited Review – AP01

Date: April 20, 2015

IRB#: 5396

Principal Investigator: Tracy Elizabeth Henry

Approval Date: 04/20/2015

Expiration Date: 03/31/2016

Study Title: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES IDENTIFIED WITH A SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY

Expedited Category: 6 & 7

Collection/Use of PHI: No

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed and granted expedited approval of the above-referenced research study. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Obtain informed consent and research privacy authorization using the currently approved, stamped forms and retain all original, signed forms, if applicable.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications.
- Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Promptly submit continuing review documents to the IRB upon notification approximately 60 days prior to the expiration date indicated above.
- Submit a final closure report at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Laurette Taylor'.

E. Laurette Taylor, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix B: Informed Consent - Graduate

701-A-1

**University of Oklahoma
Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

Project Title: Lived Experiences of a High School Graduate Identified with a Specific Learning Disability
Principal Investigator: Tracy Henry, M.Ed.
Department: Educational Psychology, Special Education

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. This study is being conducted at the University of Oklahoma. You were selected as a possible participant because you graduated from high school after being identified with a Specific Learning Disability.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of this study is to discover your opinions of how you graduated with a standard high school diploma.

Number of Participants

About 6 people will take part in this study: 2 high school graduates, 2 family members of the graduate's choosing, and 2 school teachers of the graduate's choosing.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to talk about how you graduated from high school with a standard high school diploma. These questions are open ended and there are no correct answers. With your permission, your responses will be taped for later transcription (I will type out your answers). You can volunteer any information you wish and you can stop the interview at any time or choose not to answer any question.

Length of Participation

You will spend approximately 10 hours being interviewed for this research study, with the possibility of meeting around 4 times for initial interview meeting, and for meetings for clarification and follow up questions, and to conduct a member check in which you verify that what the researcher transcribed is what you actually said and meant.

Risks of being in the study are:

There is a possible risk of deductive identification. Data will be collected anonymously by not identifying the school district from which you graduated, the town in which you live, or the trade school you attended before and after graduation. You will be given a pseudonym prior to the interview process. Confidentiality will be addressed during the planning process, data collection, data cleaning and dissemination of results.

All identifying characteristics will be changed or removed in order to respect the confidentiality of all participants.



Appendix C: Informed Consent – Family Member

701-A-1

**University of Oklahoma
Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

Project Title: Lived Experiences of a High School Graduate Identified with a Specific Learning Disability
Principal Investigator: Tracy Henry, M.Ed.
Department: Educational Psychology, Special Education

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. This study is being conducted at the University of Oklahoma. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a family member of a student who graduated from high school after being identified with a Specific Learning Disability.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of this study is to discover your opinions of how he graduated with a standard high school diploma.

Number of Participants

About 6 people will take part in this study: 2 high school graduates, 2 family members of the graduate's choosing, and 2 school teachers of the graduate's choosing.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to talk about how a student of yours graduated from high school with a standard high school diploma. These questions are open ended and there are no correct answers. With your permission, your responses will be taped for later transcription (I will type out your answers). You can volunteer any information you wish and you can stop the interview at any time or choose not to answer any question.

Length of Participation

You will spend approximately 10 hours being interviewed for this research study, with the possibility of meeting around 4 times for the initial interview meeting, and for meetings for clarification and follow up questions, and to conduct a member check in which you verify that what the researcher transcribed is what you actually said and meant.

Risks of being in the study are:

There is a possible risk of deductive identification. Data will be collected anonymously by not identifying the school district from which you graduated, the town in which you live, or the trade school you attended before and after graduation. You will be given a pseudonym prior to the interview process. Confidentiality will be addressed during the planning process, data collection, data cleaning and dissemination of results.

Benefits of being in the study are:

None

Page 1 of 3
Revised 07/01/2012



IRB NUMBER: 5396
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/20/2015
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 03/31/2016

Appendix D: Informed Consent – Teacher

701-A-1

**University of Oklahoma
Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

Project Title: Lived Experiences of a High School Graduate Identified with a Specific Learning Disability
Principal Investigator: Tracy Henry, M.Ed.
Department: Educational Psychology, Special Education

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. This study is being conducted at the University of Oklahoma. You were selected as a possible participant because you taught a student who graduated from high school after being identified with a Specific Learning Disability.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of this study is to discover your opinions of how he graduated with a standard high school diploma.

Number of Participants

About 6 people will take part in this study: 2 high school graduates, 2 family members of the graduate's choosing, and 2 school teachers of the graduate's choosing.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to talk about how your family member, a student with disabilities, graduated from high school with a standard high school diploma. These questions are open ended and there are no correct answers. With your permission, your responses will be taped for later transcription (I will type out your answers). You can volunteer any information you wish and you can stop the interview at any time or choose not to answer any question.

Length of Participation

You will spend approximately 10 hours being interviewed for this research study, with the possibility of meeting around 4 times for the initial interview meeting, and for meetings for clarification and follow up questions, and to conduct a member check in which you verify that what the researcher transcribed is what you actually said and meant.



Appendix E: Interview Protocol – Graduate

Tracy Henry
Interview Protocol - Graduate
4/1/15

Interview Protocol-Graduate

Introduction

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate. As you know, I am interested in interviewing a high school graduate identified with a specific learning disability, along with a family member of his choosing and teacher of his choosing. Through this interview process I will try to understand your perceptions of how you overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with your disabilities in order to receive a standard diploma (Creswell, 1998) while many of your peers also identified with a SLD did not.

Particularly, I am trying to understand the following:

1. What role did the student play in his own success?
2. What are your perceptions of how you overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with your disability in order to receive a standard high school diploma?
3. What role did your family play in your school success?
4. What are your family member's perceptions of how you overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with your disability in order to receive a standard high school diploma?
5. What role did the school play in your school success?
6. What are the school faculty's perceptions of how you overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with your disabilities in order to receive a standard high school diploma?



Appendix F: Interview Protocol – Family Member

Tracy Henry
Interview Protocol – Family Member
4/15/15

Interview Protocol-Family Member

Introduction

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate. As you know, I am interested in interviewing a high school graduate identified with a specific learning disability, along with a family member of his choosing and teacher of his choosing. Through this interview process I will try to understand your perceptions of how he overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with his disability in order to receive a standard diploma (Creswell, 1998) while many of his peers also identified with a SLD did not.

Particularly, I am trying to understand the following:

1. What role did the student play in his own school success?
2. What are his perceptions of how he overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with his disability in order to receive a standard high school diploma?
3. What role did his family play in his school success?
4. What are his family member's perceptions of how he overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with his disability in order to receive a standard high school diploma?
5. What role did the school play in his school success?
6. What are the school faculty's perceptions of how he overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with his disabilities in order to receive a standard high school diploma?



Appendix G: Interview Protocol – Teacher

Tracy Henry
Interview Protocol – Teacher
4/15/15

Interview Protocol-Teacher

Introduction

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate. As you know, I am interested in interviewing a high school graduate identified with a specific learning disability, along with a family member of his choosing and teacher of his choosing. Through this interview process I will try to understand your perceptions of how he overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with his disability in order to receive a standard diploma (Creswell, 1998) while many of his peers also identified with a SLD did not.

Particularly, I am trying to understand the following:

1. What role did the student play in his own school success?
2. What are his perceptions of how he overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with his disability in order to receive a standard high school diploma?
3. What role did his family play in his school success?
4. What are his family member's perceptions of how he overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with his disability in order to receive a standard high school diploma?
5. What role did the school play in his school success?
6. What are the school faculty's perceptions of how he overcame the barriers and obstacles associated with his disabilities in order to receive a standard high school diploma?



Appendix H: Special Education Graduation Rates Tables

E.1: Special Education-Students Ages 14-21 Served under Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act- Part B- Left School- by Reason- 2011 to 2012

E.2 9-6 Special Education-Graduation Rate among Students Ages 14-21 Served under

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- Part B- 2011 to 2012

E.3: Special Education-Change in Graduation Rate among Students Ages 14-21 Served

under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- Part B- Fall 2011 School

Year to Fall 2012 School Year

E.4: Special Education-Dropout Rate among Students Ages 14-21 Served under

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- Part B- 2011 to 2012

E.5: Special Education-Change in Dropout Rate among Students Ages 14-21 Served

under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- Part B- Fall 2012 School

Year to Fall 2011 School Year

E.6: Graduation Rates of Students Identified with Disabilities compared to their Non-

Disabled Peers

9-5 Special Education-Students Ages 14-21 Served under Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act- Part B- Left School- by Reason- 2011 to 2012

State	Graduate with Diploma	Received a Certificate	Dropped Out	Died or Aged Out
U.S.	247,596	53,564	77,797	7,058
AK	515	146	387	19
AL	2,285	1,831	584	122
AR	3,083	711	547	34
AZ	4,474		1,822	48
CA	18,215	9,379	5,644	1441
CO	3,504	85	1,458	149
CT	3,749	38	704	127
DC	467	84	442	24
DE	557	71	167	17
FL	10,346	5,104	4,166	103
GA	4,868	3,118	3,395	37
HI	965	147	150	47
IA	3,566	0	997	76
ID	624	277	150	39
IL	14,087	166	2,676	546
IN	5,617	1,056	820	99
KS	3,112		731	104
KY	3,370	462	790	55
LA	1,377	1,105	1,641	57
MA	7,710	542	2,220	491
MD	4,359	812	1,995	144
ME	1,130	28	235	13
MI	9,190	989	4,272	61
MN	5,872		723	54
MO	6,563	10	1,411	152
MS	877	1,931	318	30
MT	872		233	3
NC	7,649	598	2,589	92
ND	480		127	48
NE	2,162	14	396	44
NH	1,752	199	282	40
NJ	13,603		2,455	348
NM	1,525	478	623	17
NV	738	340	915	59
NY	16,411	4,796	5,618	322
OH	6,425	2,886	3,628	94
OK	4,508		1,183	22
OR	1,919	1,150	1,235	193
PA	18,715	86	2,661	282
RI	1,260	4	158	95
SC	2,408	276	2,671	431
SD	355		131	51
TN	5,154	1,028	495	143
TX	17,655	9,081	5,758	181

9-6 Special Education-Graduation Rate among Students Ages 14-21 Served under
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- Part B- 2011 to 2012

State	All that Left	Graduate with Diploma	% [1]
U.S.	376,452	243,311	64.6
AK	1,067	515	48.3
AL	4,822	2,285	47.4
AR	3,735	3,083	82.5
AZ	6,344	4,474	70.5
CA	34,679	18,215	52.5
CO	5,196	3,504	67.4
CT	4,618	3,749	81.2
DC	1,017	467	45.9
DE	812	557	68.6
FL	19,719	10,346	52.5
GA	11,416	4,866	42.6
HI	1,309	965	73.7
IA	4,639	3,566	76.9
ID	N/A	N/A	N/A
IL	17,475	14,087	80.6
IN	7,592	5,617	74
KS	3,947	3,112	78.8
KY	4,677	3,370	72.1
LA	4,180	1,377	32.9
MA	10,963	7,710	70.3
MD	7,310	4,359	59.6
ME	1,406	1,130	80.4
MI	14,421	9,190	63.7
MN	6,649	5,872	88.3
MO	8,136	6,563	80.7
MS	3,156	877	27.8
MT	1,108	872	78.7
NC	10,748	7,469	69.5
ND	655	480	73.3
NE	2,616	2,162	82.6
NH	2,273	1,752	77.1
NJ	16,406	13,603	82.9
NM	2,643	1,525	57.7
NV	N/A	N/A	N/A
NY	27,147	16,411	60.5
OH	13,033	6,425	49.3
OK	5,713	4,508	78.9
OR	4,497	1,919	42.7
PA	21,744	18,715	86.1
RI	1,517	1,260	83.1
SC	5,786	2,408	41.6
SD	537	355	66.1
TN	6,820	5,154	75.6
TX	32,675	17,655	54

9-7 Special Education-Dropout Rate among Students Ages 14-21 Served under
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- Part B- 2011 to 2012

State	All that Left	Dropped Out	% [1]
U.S.	378,285	74,377	19.7
AK	1,067	387	36.3
AL	4,822	584	12.1
AR	3,735	547	14.6
AZ	6,344	1,822	28.7
CA	34,679	5,644	16.3
CO	5,196	1,458	28.1
CT	4,618	704	15.2
DC	1,017	442	43.5
DE	812	167	20.6
FL	19,719	4,166	21.1
GA	11,416	3,395	29.7
HI	1,309	150	11.5
IA	4,639	997	21.5
ID	1,090	150	13.8
IL	17,475	2,676	15.3
IN	7,592	820	10.8
KS	3,947	731	18.5
KY	4,677	790	16.9
LA	4,180	1,641	39.3
MA	10,963	2,220	20.2
MD	7,310	1,995	27.3
ME	1,406	235	16.7
MI	14,421	4,272	29.6
MN	6,649	723	10.9
MO	8,136	1,411	17.3
MS	3,156	318	10.1
MT	1,108	233	21.0
NC	10,748	2,589	24.1
ND	655	127	19.4
NE	2,616	396	15.1
NH	2,273	282	12.4
NJ	16,406	2,455	15.0
NM	2,643	623	23.6
NV	N/A	N/A	N/A
NY	27,147	5,618	20.7
OH	13,033	3,628	27.8
OK	5,713	1,183	20.7
OR	4,497	1,235	27.5
PA	21,744	2,661	12.2
RI	1,517	158	10.4
SC	5,786	2,671	46.2
SD	537	131	24.4
TN	6,820	495	7.3
TX	32,675	5,758	17.6

9-8 Special Education-Change in Graduation Rate among Students Ages 14-21

Served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- Part B- Fall 2011 School

Year to Fall 2012 School Year

State	Fall 2011 Graduation Rate (%) [1]	Fall 2012 Graduation Rate (%) [1]	Difference (% pts) [2]
U.S.	63.8	64.3	-0.5
AK	48.8	48.3	0.5
AL	44.4	47.4	-3.0
AR	82.8	82.5	0.3
AZ	79.5	70.5	9.0
CA	54.0	52.5	1.5
CO	66.4	67.4	-1.0
CT	80.2	81.2	-1.0
DC	52.4	45.9	6.5
DE	69.2	68.6	0.6
FL	53.3	52.5	0.8
GA	40.8	42.6	-1.8
HI	77.8	73.7	4.1
IA	77.6	76.9	0.7
ID	N/A	N/A	N/A
IL	78.8	80.6	-1.8
IN	75.0	74.0	1.0
KS	78.8	78.8	0.0
KY	74.1	72.1	2.0
LA	28.8	32.9	-4.1
MA	68.3	70.3	-2.0
MD	63.8	59.6	4.2
ME	75.7	80.4	-4.7
MI	67.1	63.7	3.4
MN	87.9	88.3	-0.4
MO	79.3	80.7	-1.4
MS	27.7	27.8	-0.1
MT	74.1	78.7	-4.6
NC	64.0	69.5	-5.5
ND	69.1	73.3	-4.2
NE	79.0	82.6	-3.6
NH	77.1	77.1	0.0
NJ	82.7	82.9	-0.2
NM	51.4	57.7	-6.3
NV	N/A	N/A	N/A
NY	59.0	60.5	-1.5
OH	50.5	49.3	1.2
OK	80.5	78.9	1.6
OR	45.8	42.7	3.1
PA	87.3	86.1	1.2
RI	78.2	83.1	-4.9
SC	39.4	41.6	-2.2
SD	67.7	66.1	1.6

9-9 Special Education-Change in Dropout Rate among Students Ages 14-21 Served
under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- Part B- Fall 2012 School Year to Fall
2011 School Year

State	Fall 2010 Droupout Rate (%) [1]	Fall 2011 Dropout Rate (%) [1]	Difference (% pts) [2]
U.S.	19.8	20.2	0.4
AK	34.7	36.3	1.6
AL	16.3	12.1	-4.2
AR	14.9	14.6	-0.3
AZ	19.8	28.7	8.9
CA	17.4	16.3	-1.1
CO	29.9	28.1	-1.8
CT	16.5	15.2	-1.3
DC	38.9	43.5	4.6
DE	26	20.6	-5.4
FL	20	21.1	1.1
GA	28.3	29.7	1.4
HI	9.8	11.5	1.7
IA	21.2	21.5	0.3
ID	15.9	13.8	-2.1
IL	18.3	15.3	-3.0
IN	11.5	10.8	-0.7
KS	18.5	18.5	0.0
KY	14.5	16.9	2.4
LA	37.2	39.3	2.1
MA	22.6	20.2	-2.4
MD	24.4	27.3	2.9
ME	20.6	16.7	-3.9
MI	26.9	29.6	2.7
MN	10.6	10.9	0.3
MO	18.6	17.3	-1.3
MS	10.8	10.1	-0.7
MT	25.1	21.0	-4.1
NC	28.7	24.1	-4.6
ND	25.9	19.4	-6.5
NE	17.8	15.1	-2.7
NH	12.4	12.4	0.0
NJ	15.4	15.0	-0.4
NM	32	23.6	-8.4
NV	N/A	N/A	N/A
NY	20.6	20.7	0.1
OH	19.1	27.8	8.7
OK	19.2	20.7	1.5
OR	24.7	27.5	2.8
PA	10.9	12.2	1.3
RI	16.5	10.4	-6.1
SC	52.3	46.2	-6.1
SD	22.6	24.4	1.8

Appendix I: Operational Definitions

The following operational definitions were used in this research study.

1. Accommodations - According to the Oklahoma State Department of Education, Accommodations are services or supports used to enable students to access subject matter and instruction. Accommodations do not alter the content or the expectations required of the student but are an adjustment to the instructional method (2014).
2. Annual Goals - Educational expectations of students with disabilities that are included in the student's IEP. Annual goals are used to direct the services and instruction that students receive.
3. Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) - Guarantees the rights of students with disabilities to special education and related services free of charge.
4. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) - Federal law that “ensures 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” and “to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected ...” (Section 1400(d), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). IDEA sets the stage for all students with disabilities to be given an individualized education within a continuum of educational placements (Wright, 2010).
5. Individualized Education Program (IEP) - A formal contract outlining services a student identified with a disability is to receive.

6. Modifications - An adjustment to the instructional content or performance expectations of students with disabilities from what is expected or taught to students in general education.
7. No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) - Federal law affecting the education of every public school student in the country. The primary purpose of NCLB is to ensure that every student in public schools achieves important learning goals while being educated by well-prepared teachers. The law also requires that school districts assume responsibility for increasing student achievement to 100% proficiency on state assessments in math and reading. Furthermore, NCLB requires schools to close academic gaps between economically advantaged students and students who are from different economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds as well as students with disabilities (NCLB) (Yell, 2006).
8. Related Services - Developmental, corrective, or other services required to assist a student identified with a disability to benefit from educational services. Includes but is not limited to, transportation, speech pathology, audiology, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, and interpreters.
9. Special Education - Services provided to students who qualify, as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), in order to promote excellence in education from infancy to adulthood.
10. Specific Learning Disability (SLD) - Defined in the Policies and Procedures for Special Education in Oklahoma (2010) as a Disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read,

write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (p. 93).

11. Students with Disabilities - The federal definition of a disability includes a person who:

- (i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such a person's major life activities;
- (ii) has a record of such impairment, or
- (iii) is regarded as having such impairment.
- (iv) (Public Law 101-336, Section 3)

12. Transition - Activities and services that assist students with disabilities to successfully move from the school environment to the post-school environment. These services include education, independent living, and community participation.

Appendix J: Demographics

2010 Community Demographics

Population

Annual Population Estimates	882 Estimate
Decennial Census Population Counts	796

Race & Origin (Hispanic)

	Count	%
Non-Hispanic		
White	610	76.6%
Black	18	2.3%
American Indian	65	8.2%
Asian	3	0.4%
Islander	0	0.0%
Other	0	0.0%
Two or More Races	22	2.8%
Hispanic	78	9.8%
Total Population	796	-

Detailed Race

	Count	%
One Race	764	96.0%
White	650	81.7%
	200	

Black	18	2.3%
American Indian	72	9.0%
Asian	3	0.4%
Asian Indian	0	0.0%
Chinese	0	0.0%
Filipino	2	0.3%
Japanese	0	0.0%
Korean	1	0.1%
Vietnamese	0	0.0%
Other (1)	0	0.0%
Islander	0	0.0%
Native Hawaiian	0	0.0%
Guamanian or Chamorro	0	0.0%
Samoaan	0	0.0%
Other (2)	0	0.0%
Other	21	2.6%
Two or More Races	32	4.0%
White; American Indian	21	2.6%
White; Asian	2	0.3%
White, Black	2	0.3%
White; Other	6	0.8%
Total Population	796	-

Hispanic or Latino

	Count	%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	78	9.8%
Mexican	71	8.9%
Puerto Rican	0	0.0%
Cuban	0	0.0%
Other (1)	7	0.9%

Sex

	Count	%	Median Age
Male	434	54.5%	34.3 Years
Female	362	45.5%	37.3 Years
Total Population	796	-	35.5 Years

Age Breakdown

	Count	%
Under 10 Years	105	13.2%
10 to 19 Years	94	11.8%
20 to 29 Years	146	18.3%
30 to 39 Years	113	14.2%
40 to 49 Years	93	11.7%
50 to 59 Years	106	13.3%
60 to 69 Years	75	9.4%

Over 69 Years	64	8.0%
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Households

Average Household Size	2.57 Persons
Average Family Size	3.06 Persons

Household Types

	Count	%
Family Households	187	71.4%
With own children under 18 years	81	30.9%
Husband-Wife Family	148	56.5%
With own children under 18 years	59	22.5%
Male householder, no wife present	14	5.3%
With own children under 18 years	8	3.1%
Female householder, no husband present	25	9.5%
With own children under 18 years	14	5.3%
Nonfamily Household	76	28.6%
Householder living alone	60	22.9%
Male	25	9.5%
65 years and over	12	4.6%
Female	35	13.4%
65 years and over	15	5.7%
Total Households	262	-

Income

Median Household Income (Census 2000)	\$34,271
American Community Survey (ACS) 2006-2010	\$42,500

Income Distribution (in thousands)

Less than \$10	27
\$10 to \$14.9	29
\$15 to \$19.9	48
\$20 to \$24.9	9
\$25 to \$29.9	31
\$30 to \$34.9	11
\$35 to \$39.9	24
\$40 to \$44.9	7
\$45 to \$49.9	24
\$50 to \$59.9	47
\$60 to \$74.9	38
\$75 to \$99.9	64
\$100 to \$124.9	3
\$125 to \$149.9	4
\$150 to \$199.9	0
\$200K+	0

Note: Source, U.S. Census Bureau.

Appendix K: Evidence for Case Study Research

Types of Evidence for Case Study Research

Source of Evidence	Strengths	Weaknesses
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted – focuses on case study topic • Insightful – provides perceived casual inferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bias due to poor questions • Response bias • Incomplete recollection • Reflexivity - interviewee expresses what interviewer wants to hear
Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable – repeated review • Unobtrusive – exist prior to case study • Exact – names, etc. • Broad coverage – extended time span 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retrievability – difficult • Biased selectivity • Reporting bias – reflects author bias • Access – may be blocked
Archival Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as above • Precise and quantitative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as above • Privacy might inhibit access
Direct Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reality – covers events in real time • Contextual – covers event contest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-consuming • Selectivity – might miss facts • Reflexivity – observer’s presence might cause change • Cost – observers need time
Participant Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as above • Insightful into interpersonal behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as above • Bias due to investigator’s actions
Physical Artifacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insightful into cultural features • Insightful into technical operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selectivity • Availability

Note: (Yin, 1994, p. 80)

Appendix J References

2010 Census Summary File 1 – Oklahoma [machine-readable data files]/prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2011. Tables DPSF8, DPSF10, DPSF13, DPSF19, DPSF20, DPSF21, DPSF23.

2010 Census Summary File 1 – Oklahoma [machine-readable data files]/prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2011. Tables H1, H3, H4, H5.

2010 Census Bureau File 1 – Oklahoma [machine-readable data files]/prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2011. Tables P1, P9, P12, P13, P17, P19. *Federal Register*, Vol. 77, No. 17, January 26, 2012, p. 4035.

U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010 American Community Survey, Tables B01003, B11001, B17001, B19001, B19013.

Appendix K: Types of Evidence for Case Study Research

Source of Evidence	Strengths	Weaknesses
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted – focuses on case study topic • Insightful – provides perceived casual inferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bias due to poor questions • Response bias • Incomplete recollection • Reflexivity - interviewee expresses what interviewer wants to hear
Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable – repeated review • Unobtrusive – exist prior to case study • Exact – names, etc. • Broad coverage – extended time span 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retrievability – difficult • Biased selectivity • Reporting bias – reflects author bias • Access – may be blocked
Archival Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as above • Precise and quantitative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as above • Privacy might inhibit access
Direct Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reality – covers events in real time • Contextual – covers event contest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-consuming • Selectivity – might miss facts • Reflexivity – observer’s presence might cause change • Cost – observers need time
Participant Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as above • Insightful into interpersonal behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as above • Bias due to investigator’s actions
Physical Artifacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insightful into cultural features • Insightful into technical operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selectivity • Availability

Note: (Yin, 1994, p. 80)

Appendix L: Credibility Measures for Qualitative Research

Triangulation – search for convergence of, or consistency among, evidence from multiple and varied data sources (observations/interview; one participant & another; interviews/documents).

- *Data triangulation* – use of varied data sources in a study.
- *Investigator triangulation* – use of several researchers, evaluators, peer de-briefers.
- *Theory triangulation* – use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data.
- *Methodological triangulation* – use of multiple methods to study a single problem.

Disconfirming evidence – after establishing preliminary themes/categories, the researcher looks for evidence inconsistent with these themes (outliers); also known as negative or discrepant case analysis.

Researcher reflexivity – researchers attempt to understand and self-disclose their assumptions, beliefs, values, and biases (i.e., being forthright about position/perspective).

Member checks – having participants review and confirm the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of interview transcriptions or observational field notes.

- *First level* – taking transcriptions to participants prior to analysis and interpretations of results.
- *Second level* – taking analysis and interpretations of data to participants (prior to publication) for validation of (or support for) researchers' conclusions.

Collaborative work – involving multiple researchers in designing a study or concurring about conclusions to ensure that analyses and interpretations are not idiosyncratic

and/or biased; could involve interrater reliability checks on the observations made or the coding of data. (The notion that persons working together will get reliable results is dependent on the “truth claim assumption that one can get accurate descriptions of situational realities.)

External auditors – using outsiders (to the research) to examine if, and confirm that, a researcher’s inferences are logical and grounded in findings.

Peer debriefing – having a colleague or someone familiar with the phenomena being studied review and provide critical feedback on descriptions analyses, and interpretations or a study’s results.

Audit trail – keeping track of interviews conducted and/or specific times and dates spent observing as well as who was observed on each occasion; used to document and substantiate that sufficient time was spent in the field to claim dependable and confirmable results.

Prolonged field engagement – repeated, substantive observations, multiple, in-depth interviews, inspection of a range of relevant documents, thick description validates the study’s soundness.

Thick, detailed description – reporting sufficient quotes and field note descriptions to provide evidence for researchers’ interpretations and conclusions.

Particularizability – documenting cases with thick description so that readers can determine the degree of transferability to their own situations.

Note: Brantlinger et al., 2005, pg. 201

Appendix M: Code Book

Code Book Level 3: Audit Trail

Level 3 Coding Themes	Level 2 Coding Patterns	Level 1 Coding Codes
Disability Awareness	<i>Special Education</i>	Special Education Teachers Were Supportive, General Education Teachers: Good and Bad, Confusing at First, Finally Felt They Had Control
	<i>Identification</i>	Confusing, Heartbreaking, Felt Better Once the Process Started,
	<i>School: General Education and Special Education</i>	Most Teachers Understood, Some Didn't, Most Used Supports Willingly, Some Didn't, Special Education Provided Support to Complete School, When General Education Teachers Used Supports Students Did Better in Their Classes
IEP Participation		

Family

Parents, Family Members,
Siblings

School

General Education Teachers,
Related Service Providers,
Special Education Teachers,
Peer Support, Career Tech
Teachers, Career Tech
Counselors

Community

Boss, Friends

**Goal Setting and
Attainment**

High School Diploma

Successful Completion of
High School

Vo Tech Completion

Successful Completion of
Certifications, Successful
Completion of 13th Year

Employment

Able to Work During High
School, Found Employment
Upon Graduation

Use of Supports

*Accommodations/
Modifications/ Adaptations*

Extended Time, Use of
Resource Room, Limited
Distractors, Someone to Read
for Them

Family Involvement

Involvements: Parent, Other
Family Members

School Involvement

General Education Teachers,
Special Education Teachers,
Related Service Providers

Community Involvement

Community Coaches, Bosses,
Church, Outside
Clubs/Activities

Employment

During High School

Farming, Raising Horses

After Graduation

Fire Department, City Worker

Self-Determination

Disability Awareness

Struggling at First, Working
with Teachers: Both General
and Special Educators,
Gaining Understanding of
Their Disabilities

Knowing Strengths

Hands On, Working Outside

Knowing Weaknesses

Book Work, Math, Reading

Self-Advocacy

*Understanding What You
Need to Be Successful*

Understanding Disability and
Knowing What is Needed to
be Successful

*Asking For Accommodations/
Modifications/ Adaptations*

Knowing Who to go to for
Help, Learning How to Ask
for
Accommodations/Modificatio
ns/
Adaptations

Learning How to Ask for
Accommodations/Modificatio
ns/ Adaptations

Transition Planning

Attending Career Tech

Choosing Their Own
Programs, Hands On, Support
Staff: Teachers and
Counselors

Attending IEP Meetings

Counselors Attended
Meetings:

*Utilizing Supports at High
School and Career Tech*

Understood Disabilities and
Helped Make Program
Modifications, Teacher
Support

**Important Information
Obtained During Interviews**

Implications

Background
