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TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: NAVIGATING BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS IN SECONDARY TRANSITION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN A VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOL

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TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: NAVIGATING BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS IN SECONDARY TRANSITION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN A VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOL

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Virtual charter schools offer flexibility, but can hinder the support that students with disabilities (SWD) need for life after high school. SWD is a heterogeneous population served under IDEA. Transition supports vary by disability category and level of need. This basic qualitative interview study examined how nine special education (SPED) teachers in a full-time virtual charter school perceive, communicate, and enact expectations during transition planning. Here, teacher expectations represent teachers' beliefs about students' potential, conveyed through instruction, feedback, and opportunities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were coded thematically using the Pygmalion Effect, High Expectations Theory (HET), and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) as guiding frameworks. Three patterns emerged. First, expectation signals matter: teachers who linked transition activities to students' future goals and voiced high expectations reported stronger engagement and post-school aspirations as perceived by teachers. Second, virtual challenges persist, including limited face-to-face contact, lack of family involvement, and trauma-related mental health concerns. Finally, relational groundwork is essential. Teachers described setting meaningful transition goals that depend on students' emotional readiness and on the trust between teachers, students, and families. Based on these findings, three recommendations are offered: targeted professional development focused on expectation-setting, the integration of transition tasks into the curriculum, and three-way communication loops among teachers, families, and students.

Keywords: career readiness, emotional readiness, Expectancy-Value Theory, High Expectations Theory, postsecondary outcomes, Pygmalion effect, basic qualitative design, special education, teacher expectations, transition planning, virtual charter schools, virtual education

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Virtual schools have influenced how families and students access K-12 education worldwide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 1.6 billion students moved to some type of virtual learning (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). This came at a time when virtual enrollment had already been rising for over two decades, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020). Reports from the National Education Policy Center find that full-time virtual and blended programs are expanding quickly; however, dependence on asynchronous coursework may reduce opportunities to individualize instruction (Molnar et al., 2021). This raises concerns for students with disabilities (SWD) whose support often depends on real-time instructional supports. In rural contexts, where families frequently choose virtual options, achievement trends also lag behind brick-and-mortar peers (Hamlin et al., 2023).

The challenge is not because of a lack of access to technology. Studies have identified areas where teachers lack skills, training, or tools needed to support SWD in virtual settings (Starks & Reich, 2023). For example, limited teacher preparation programs for online special education (SPED), inconsistent digital literacy, and spotty teacher-family communication loops all contribute to these gaps (Smith et al., 2022; Starks & Reich, 2023). Research also shows that ongoing, practice-based professional development can improve teachers' competence and instructional decisions. Hanline et al. (2013) found that teachers who completed year-long online coursework not only increased their perceived competence but also implemented concrete instructional changes, strengthened IEP and transition practices, and adopted evidence-based strategies aligned with student needs. Addressing these gaps starts with looking at how teachers articulate and reinforce expectations in day-to-day transition planning for high school SWD.

Decades of evidence confirm that students learn more when support is individualized, with one of the most fundamental supports being expectation-setting. Teacher expectations are the thoughts teachers have about students' likely achievement and behavior. Those beliefs are enacted through classroom routines, task demands, and feedback. Research on teacher expectancies shows that teachers' beliefs can become self-fulfilling prophecies (the Pygmalion Effect; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Research on High Expectations Theory (HET) emphasizes proactive, equitable practices. The practices include flexible grouping, high-level tasks, a warm climate, and specific feedback, all of which communicate a belief in every student (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) explains how teacher communication shapes students' perceived competence and task value (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). With fewer informal cues online, communicated expectations carry more weight.

For SWD, the stakes are high; transition decisions can shape access to work, college, and independent living. The way teachers implement and interpret requirements can vary widely. National trend data show that SWD enroll in college at a lower rate than their nondisabled peers (Hussar et al., 2020; Molnar, 2021). Research has identified practices associated with better post-school outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Miller-Warren, 2015; Rowe et al., 2021). Recent work linking transition indicators shows that several transition practices are all associated with stronger post-school education and employment outcomes for SWD (Hennessey et al., 2024; Morningstar et al., 2012). Despite this evidence, gaps persist when transition plans prioritize compliance over support. Virtual settings introduce additional challenges, such as reduced face-to-face interaction, reliance on technology, and limited access to community-based experiences, all of which can reduce the quality of transition planning (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Molnar et

al., 2021). Some may question whether virtual schools can offer the same support and real-world transition experiences as brick-and-mortar settings.

Background

During transition planning, teacher expectations are the judgments teachers form about what students will achieve and how they will progress. These expectations influenced SWD achievement, engagement, and motivation (Brophy & Good, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). When expectations are low, students are offered less challenge and fewer opportunities. When expectations are high, teachers keep ambitious, IEP-aligned goals in place, add the supports students need, spell out what success looks like, and provide feedback (Rubie-Davies, 2015). In traditional classrooms, immediate feedback allows teachers to adjust their expectations in real time (Batzle et al., 2010; Rubie-Davies, 2015). In virtual settings, teachers must rely more on visible cues rather than on in-person signals. Small changes in what is assigned or how feedback is given can unintentionally lower rigor over time (Brophy, 1983; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

The transition from high school to postsecondary education for SWD presents challenges and opportunities. IDEA requires results-oriented transition plans that stress life skills, vocational training, and further education (Miller-Warren, 2015; Sprunger et al., 2018). Mazzotti and Rowe (2015) emphasized the importance of an ongoing progression in evidence-based strategies implemented by SPED teachers in students' success, bridging that transitional phase in their lives. High or low teacher expectations influence every element of a transition plan from the choice and rigor of career activities assigned (Newman et al., 2016; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996).

Translating those plans into experiences in virtual schools, however, can face a wide range of implementation barriers. Hamlin et al. (2023) highlighted the need for high parental

engagement while noting that collaborative learning opportunities common in traditional classrooms are often absent in virtual learning environments. And despite the need for some level of computer technology to access online courses, that access can be inconsistent or limited for some students, particularly those experiencing poverty (Reimer & Hill, 2022). As emphasized by the NEPC's 2021 report, limited access to technological tools such as hardware and wireless internet is frequently cited as a barrier (Molnar et al., 2021). Moreover, these issues often overlap and compound within the SWD population. Miller-Warren (2015) noted a deficit in postsecondary transition planning for SWD completing virtual programs.

In virtual settings, parent engagement becomes a requirement rather than an optional support. Building on work showing that parents' involvement in IEP and transition planning shapes their engagement and experiences in special education (Carlson et al., 2020), researchers have noted that virtual models depend on parental participation to sustain students' access, attendance, and progress (Ford et al., 2021; Hamlin et al., 2023). In one study of online early childhood programs, teachers reported relying on caregivers to serve as the bridge between home and school, while also identifying limited parent involvement and capacity as challenges in virtual teaching (Ford et al., 2021). Complementing these findings, Elias et al. (2022) found that tools such as text messages can support ongoing, two-way communication with parents when used to invite dialogue rather than for one-way updates. Together, this literature suggests that virtual formats increase the importance and visibility of family engagement while also highlighting differences in families' time, resources, and capacity to support learning.

Statement of the Problem

This study addresses the problem of practice in a virtual charter school. It explores how SPED teachers perceive, communicate, and enact expectations during transition planning for

SWD. The study is guided by three theories: the Pygmalion effect, HET, and EVT. Together, they focus the study on the daily message and routines that can either benefit or hinder students' progress toward post-secondary education, work, and independent living. The background section positions the problem by detailing a virtual school's structures, the site context, and IDEA transition requirements, alongside implementation challenges.

The idea that teacher expectations drive student motivation, engagement, and performance is a topic that has been widely explored. Brophy and Good (1970), for example, examined the relationship between teacher expectations and student performance among high- and low-expectation students. Montague & Rinaldi (2001) perceived this expectation-motivation principle as key to serving at-risk students. While most of the evidence exploring teacher expectations comes from brick-and-mortar settings, newer work shows that expectations also shape SWD self-determination and post-school plans in ways that could benefit virtual transition learning (Trainor et al., 2020). This jump is considered significant as it governs access to work, college, and independent living (Newman et al., 2016).

Teacher expectations filter which transition activities students receive and what those tasks look like. While working in a virtual format, fewer face-to-face cues can alter how teachers set and signal expectations (Hamlin et al., 2023; Petretto et al., 2021; Trainor & Romano, 2023). One potential benefit is that online environments can constrain the channels through which bias often operates, via tools such as randomized participation, standardized rubrics, and anonymous grading (İnan-Kaya & Rubie-Davies, 2022). However, Skousen and Vogel (2024) identified the ability to communicate effectively online as a skill set needed for success in the virtual learning model. Accordingly, transition planning carries greater weight online because expectation signals

must do the work that informal cues once did. When those signals are mistaken, students may receive fewer or less rigorous transition opportunities.

This study addresses a gap by exploring how virtual SPED teachers perceive, communicate, and enact expectations during transition planning. Findings will clarify the beliefs, practices, and barriers that can turn compliance-driven plans into pathways to real postsecondary success. Yet, despite the evidence, knowledge about teacher expectations in virtual transition planning remains thin; the following section outlines where the literature falls short and how this study will address these gaps.

The Research Gap

Virtual enrollment has been increasing, and research on teacher expectations exists; the influence of SPED teacher expectations on transition planning in virtual schools remains under-researched. The NEPC found that academic data and other reports on SWD virtual education experience are often absent, particularly in states with little oversight (Molnar et al., 2021). The existing literature documents teacher expectations, including their impact on student achievement in face-to-face instruction, but is limited in the context of virtual schools (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). What remains missing are studies that probe how virtual SPED teachers perceive, communicate, and enact transition activities.

Effective transition planning for SWD emphasizes the importance of well-structured, individualized supports. Although secondary transition plans are designed to support and prepare students for postsecondary challenges, few deliver the actual transition services such as curriculum and instruction, community experiences, employment, and adult living to address students' needs (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Miller-Warren emphasized a comprehensive transitional planning approach that includes a strategy for navigating employment and

"community experiences" (2015). For Miller-Warren (2015), this means a partnership of parents and teachers working together to strategize, drawing on a wide range of services and supports, including mental health services and vocational rehabilitation programs. Further, Carlson et al. (2020) found that parental involvement in the IEP process likely yields better outcomes for students.

Much of this literature focuses on compliance, with less attention to the beliefs and expectations teachers bring to transition planning; related work calls for authentic, participatory IEPs beyond mere compliance (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Powers et al. (2005), for example, emphasized the need to explore these gaps and their relationship with IEPs. When expectations stay low or are poorly communicated online, students' motivation and postsecondary readiness suffer.

This study addresses that gap by asking how virtual SPED teachers perceive, communicate, and enact expectations during the transition planning process. By focusing on teachers' expectations, this research aims to show how virtual schools can move beyond compliance and craft meaningful postsecondary frameworks. Until we understand those expectations, virtual SWD risk receiving vague guidance and losing self-determination. Addressing this gap can lead to higher success rates for virtual SWD in postsecondary outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

This basic qualitative study explored how SPED teachers in a virtual charter school perceive, communicate, and enact expectations during transition planning for SWD. Guided by EVT, HET, and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Theory (Pygmalion Effect), this study explores how SPED teachers' expectations shape their decisions, communication, and perceptions of students' postsecondary goals in a virtual charter school. Specifically, it examined how teacher

expectations influence perceptions of transition planning (RQ1), how SPED teachers communicate transition goals to students *(RQ2)*, and how they navigate barriers and supports in a virtual charter school *(RQ3)*. Semi-structured interviews were used to identify the barriers, supports, and practices that influence effective transition planning, and the findings inform best practices for strengthening teacher–student communication, improving virtual transition services, and ensuring that high expectations drive student success.

To address these gaps, this qualitative study explored SPED teachers at the pseudonymous Virtual Learning Academy (VLA) who are directly involved in high school transition planning. These teachers serve students across IDEA disability categories, with the largest groups at the site being Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Other Health Impairment (OHI), and Autism, and most students with IEPs are educated ≥ 80% of the day in general education. The study explored SPED teachers' experiences and perspectives in a full-time virtual charter school through the following questions.

1. How do SPED teachers perceive the value and purpose of post-high school transition activities for students with disabilities in a virtual charter school?
2. How do SPED teachers communicate the value and purpose of post-high school transition activities to students with disabilities in a virtual charter school?
3. What supports and challenges do SPED teachers report about transition activities for students with disabilities in a virtual charter school?

This qualitative study draws on three frameworks to guide the study's research questions and interview protocol in an effort to clarify how SPED teachers' beliefs are formed, conveyed, and communicated during virtual transition planning: the Pygmalion Effect, which links teacher expectations to self-fulfilling student outcomes (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968); HET, which

translates those beliefs into proactive instructional practice (Rubie-Davies, 2015; Rubie-Davies et al., 2015); and EVT, which explains how communicated expectations shape students' motivation and task value (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). VLA offered a conceptual fit for exploring expectation-setting and communication in transition planning.

Nature of Study

This study uses a basic qualitative design to explore how SPED teachers in a virtual charter school perceive, communicate, and enact expectations during transition planning for SWD. Such a design suits the aim of capturing teachers' lived experiences related to transition planning, career readiness, and expectations in virtual learning. The study was conducted at VLA, a charter school serving the K-12 student population in all 77 counties in the state of Oklahoma. Participants were SPED teachers who (a) have taught online for at least one year and (b) work with students across grade levels and disability categories. Teachers were recruited using purposeful, criterion-based sampling (Patton, 1990). This site was selected for its alignment with the study's focus on how teacher expectations are formed and communicated in a virtual context; expectation signals are facilitated through online interactions, directly mapping to the frameworks and research questions.

Data were collected through remote, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews offered flexibility to explore perspectives in depth while remaining aligned with the study's core focus on teacher expectations, making them well-suited for qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Interview transcripts were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using a coding framework aligned to the Pygmalion Effect, HET, and EVT constructs. Analysis was interpreted through the Pygmalion Effect, EVT, and HET, clarifying how teacher beliefs and communication practices shape transition planning and postsecondary goals at VLA.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided to clarify the terms used in this study:

Barrier/Support: A barrier is any contextual factor that hampers effective transition planning; a support is any factor that facilitates it (Morningstar & Mazzotti, 2014).

Career Readiness: A set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable students to enter and succeed in the workforce (Advance CTE, 2020).

Expectancy-Value Theory *(EVT)*: A motivation theory suggesting that individuals' engagement in a task is influenced by their belief in their likelihood of success (expectancy) and the value they place on the task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

High Expectations Theory *(HET)*: A framework suggesting that teachers who intentionally and consistently hold high expectations for all students positively influence student motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015).

Pygmalion Effect *(Teacher Expectancy Effect)*: Teachers' expectations about student abilities influence their behaviors toward students, impacting student performance and often creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Students with Disabilities (SWD): Term used in this dissertation to refer to students served under IDEA.

Support Intensity: The level and type of services a student receives that shape transition planning needs and delivery.

Student Motivation: The term is used to refer to teachers' perceptions of students' engagement and task-value signals during transition planning, not to direct student self-report.

Teacher Expectations: Teachers hold beliefs about students' academic potential and future success, which can influence their instructional practices, feedback, and students'

educational outcomes (Good, 2024; Johnston et al., 2019; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Wang et al., 2018). These expectations influence instructional decisions, feedback, and the opportunities provided to students (Brophy & Good, 1970).

***Transition*:** The process of preparing students with disabilities for life after high school, including postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation, as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Trainor et al., 2020).

Transition Planning: A federally required process that prepares students with disabilities for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living (IDEA, 2004). It includes measurable goals and services aligned with students' strengths, needs, and preferences (Trainor et al., 2020).

Transition Activities/Services*:* A coordinated set of age-appropriate activities designed to facilitate movement from school to post-school life (IDEA, 2004)

Assumptions

SPED teachers were assumed to provide honest responses during interviews; the study relies on honesty to capture authentic practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The study assumes that teachers can reconstruct and explain their account of transition planning, rather than a version tailored to please the researcher. Confidentiality and voluntary participation are expected to reduce social desirability bias and promote candor (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It is further assumed that teachers' shared experiences show common practices in the virtual charter school. Additionally, this study maintained that virtual learning shaped how teachers form and communicate expectations. Limited face-to-face contact and reliance on digital communication are presumed to have shaped transition planning in ways that differ from those in brick-and-

mortar settings. The study further assumes that the Pygmalion Effect, EVT, and HET are well-suited lenses for analyzing teacher expectations, communication, and perceived student motivation in a virtual context.

Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on certified SPED teachers at VLA who have at least one year of online teaching and direct responsibility for transition planning. General education teachers, students, parents, and administrators are excluded. Any claims about the influence of communicated expectations on student motivation are limited to teacher perceptions. Data were collected through teacher self-reports gathered during semi-structured interviews, with no classroom observations or student outcomes considered. Because the work is situated in a single virtual charter school, findings are transferable rather than generalized to other contexts. This site was purposefully selected for conceptual fit with virtual expectation-setting and transition planning. Finally, the study qualitatively applies the Pygmalion Effect, EVT, and HET, but does not test them statistically.

Significance

Teacher expectations are known to influence student motivation, engagement, and outcomes. By describing how teachers perceive, communicate, and enact transition activities, this research informs training and professional development programs that move IEP transition plans beyond compliance and toward impact. At the policy level, findings can guide state agencies in refining virtual school accountability measures related to transition fidelity. For scholarship, the study extends the Pygmalion Effect, EVT, and HET into an under-explored area of virtual transition planning and provides a qualitative dataset for future research.

Summary

Chapter 1 establishes the problem and frames the study. In virtual schools, low teacher expectations can undermine transition planning and leave SWD unprepared for work, college, and independent living. This chapter defines what teacher expectations mean in this study, describing what low and high expectations look like, and positions teachers' perceptions, communication, and enactment of expectations in relation to results-oriented transition services. Guided by three theories, the study employs a basic qualitative design with purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews with certified virtual SPED teachers at VLA. They describe barriers, supports, and practices that move transition plans beyond compliance. Chapter 2 reviews the empirical and theoretical literature on teacher expectations, virtual learning, and special education transition planning, setting the stage for the study's methods and findings.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Teacher expectations, as used in this study, are teachers' judgments or beliefs about what students are likely to achieve, which can be communicated through what is assigned, how goals are explained, and the feedback students receive. Classic expectancy work shows that these beliefs can become self-fulfilling: when teachers convey higher expectations, students tend to internalize stronger identities and perform accordingly (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In classroom studies, students taught by low-expectation teachers report lower self-perceptions (Rubie-Davies, 2006), while high-expectation environments are characterized by clear learning frameworks, frequent and specific feedback, and higher-order thinking questions (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010a). Longitudinal evidence further links achievement with more positive academic beliefs, suggesting a relationship between performance and perceived competence in high-expectation classrooms (Rubie-Davies et al., 2020).

Motivation research explains why these practices matter. Teachers who hold higher expectations have students who report greater intrinsic motivation and engagement and lower amotivation; these associations are mediated by need-supportive teaching (Hornstra et al., 2018). Individualized feedback appears to be a key mechanism: when teachers name progress and goals, students' perceived competence increases, which sustains engagement (Hornstra et al., 2023). Earlier expectancy findings align with this view; high expectations can interrupt self-reinforcing barriers, like lowered task demand (Good & Nichols, 2001). Consistent with Gentrup et al. (2020), low expectations are associated with easier tasks and fewer opportunities to respond, whereas unrealistically high expectations coincide with repeated non-attainment, elevated anxiety, and disengagement. Related studies show that what teachers communicate can shape

how students view their capabilities in the classroom (Karwowski et al., 2015). Together, this literature grounds the present study's exploration of how expectations are perceived, communicated, and enacted.

When teaching happens online, teachers get fewer signals from students and have fewer ways to communicate, making it harder to understand what students need and how to support them. With fewer real-time signals to adjust instruction, expectation messages must travel through written forms and structured interactions (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Meta-analytic work in K–12 online learning shows that strong teacher presence indicates the need to set clear expectations in virtual settings (Kumar et al., 2019). However, virtual schools can often struggle to provide hands-on experiences, career exploration, and communication loops with families (Rice, 2018; Repetto et al., 2010), and SPED-focused guidance calls for additional supports to ensure access and individualized help online (Hashey & Stahl, 2014). Broader analyses caution that self-paced models are not automatically individualized, especially when platforms privilege a single instructional mode (Molnar et al., 2021). These limitations are clearly where teacher expectations risk drifting unless they are made visible and actionable.

Other research reinforces these concerns. Tonks et al. (2021) found that SWD often choose virtual schools for flexibility and safety, yet their success depends on teacher availability and clear communication routines. Families in their study emphasized that timely feedback, individualized attention, and instructional materials were essential for sustaining engagement. In contrast, inconsistent instructional design and limited real-time interaction created barriers to learning. These findings show the need for visible expectation signals and structured communication loops.

Since expectations are considered situational, building teacher capacity and strengthening system supports are necessary. Teachers report that insufficient support can compromise the delivery of instruction (Long et al., 2016), and many teacher candidates receive limited training on barriers to transition planning (Wandry et al., 2008). Consistent with these concerns, Trainor and Romano (2023) emphasize that transition research and preparation often overlook the systemic and structural barriers that shape students' lived experiences. They argue that teacher preparation must incorporate intersectional awareness so teachers can recognize how overlapping identities influence transition readiness. Ongoing, high-quality professional development is therefore vital for teachers serving SWD. Hanline et al. (2013) examined 24 teachers of students with severe disabilities who completed a year-long online program. They found that teachers valued the new content but changed their classroom practices in areas where their sense of competence increased. Those changes included expanding access to the general education curriculum, strengthening IEP and transition goals, using ongoing assessment data to guide instruction, and increasing collaboration with families and paraprofessionals. (Hanline et al., 2013). Inclusive frameworks call for an opportunity mindset that pairs high expectations with responsive supports (Milner, 2012). When these challenges are neglected, students may not reach their full potential (Trainor et al., 2020).

Transition planning serves as a bridge to college, work, and independent living. Evidence identifies practices that improve post-school outcomes; however, gaps remain when plans are completed to satisfy compliance requirements rather than to drive impact (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Miller-Warren, 2015; Rowe et al., 2021). Historic analyses document lower college enrollment and employment for SWD, with later risks such as poverty (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Haber et al., 2016). Research on teacher preparation highlights inconsistent collaboration and disparities

across disability categories (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Powers et al., 2005; Alalet, 2022). Within this, teachers' expectations and communication can influence which skills are taught, how rigorous tasks become, and how life after high school is described (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2016; Johnston et al., 2019).

The remainder of Chapter 2 proceeds in five parts. First, it traces how teacher expectations develop and are communicated in classroom practice. Next, it examines educator capacity and system conditions that shape expectation formation, with attention to assessment literacy and professional learning. Third, it reviews the virtual-schooling context, including access constraints, communication loops, and teacher presence. Fourth, it considers barriers and equity concerns that intersect with expectation-setting. Finally, it synthesizes evidence-based transition practices and identifies the specific gap this study addresses in virtual charter schools.

Literature Search Strategy

This review synthesizes research on teacher expectations, communication, transition planning, and SPED in virtual settings. The study is grounded in established theory while identifying gaps in transition planning for virtual schools. Searches were conducted using ERIC, PsycINFO, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost databases. Keywords and search terms included: teacher expectations, special education, student with disabilities, SWD, special education students, SPED students, transition planning, career readiness, virtual charter schools, virtual schools, online learning, virtual special education, self-fulfilling prophecy, Expectancy-Value Theory, High Expectations Theory, communication strategies in virtual schools, Pygmalion effect in education. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine searches.

Filters were used to limit results to peer-reviewed articles, empirical studies, and seminal works published from 2000 to 2024, with exceptions for foundational theories and studies relevant to teacher expectations (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Brophy & Good, 1970). Backward citation tracking was used to identify studies and fill gaps related to SPED transition services and teacher-student interactions in virtual environments. Attention was given to research exploring communication practices, barriers to career readiness, and the impact of teacher expectations on post-school outcomes for SWD. This included sources like empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and policy analyses. This provided a foundation for exploring teacher expectations, communication, and transition planning in virtual schools, and the relationships among them.

Historical and Policy Context for Expectations

Federal policy establishes the procedural requirements and rights for transition planning. Teachers' expectations, however, emerge from preparation, school context, and evidence about individual students. Taken together, Section 504 (1973), IDEA (2004), and ESSA (2015) establish the federal rules that organize transition services and make clear the postsecondary outcomes schools are expected to prioritize for SWD. Under IDEA, schools must ensure access to the general curriculum, develop IEPs, and provide transition services designed for postsecondary goals. Each IEP must include measurable postsecondary goals and the transition activities and services needed to reach them (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These requirements are intended to provide FAPE in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and highlight how expectations are set and communicated in classrooms, while teachers retain agency in how they interpret and enact them (Kohler & Greene, 2004). Research links

measurable transition goals to stronger planning processes and student engagement, aligning school efforts with post-school outcomes (Kohler & Greene, 2004; Powers et al., 2005).

Teacher expectations in this study refer to teachers' judgments about how likely a student is to achieve at the classroom/school level. At the same time, the policies below describe the context in which those judgments are made. Decades of SPED legislation have shaped the conditions under which teacher expectations are formed for SWD. Early policies separated SWD from general education peers, often shifting instructional emphasis toward life skills and protection rather than academic growth (Albright, 1981). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 began mainstreaming SWD into general education classrooms, creating a setting in which teachers had to calibrate and communicate academic expectations in more diverse classrooms (Morningstar & Benitez, 2013).

During the 1980s and 1990s, inclusion became a defining trend in special education. IDEA strengthened mandates for inclusive education and transition services. By the 2004 reauthorization, teachers were required to plan and deliver individualized transition services (IDEA, 2004; Kohler & Greene, 2004), highlighting how expectations are set and communicated. Goal-oriented transition mandates show how teachers communicate expectations. The rise in transition planning has added a layer to teacher expectations. SPED teachers now face higher expectations from administrators, general education teachers, and families to prepare students for college, employment, and independent living (Flexer & Baer, 2005; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Nonetheless, delivering meaningful transition services remains a challenge. Despite progress, research continues to document barriers. Barriers to instruction include slowed progress, limited academic challenges, and lowered expectations (Hashey & Stahl, 2014; Morningstar & Benitez, 2013). Understanding why those barriers exist requires stepping back to

the research that first linked teacher expectations to student outcomes. Professional development, as outlined in national standards from the CEC (2020) and the National Council on Disability (2000), emphasizes the need to enhance teacher competencies in setting high expectations and providing transition services that align with post-school outcomes. This policy context establishes the conditions and outcome goals for SPED services. The following subsection reviews the empirical literature on teacher expectations. Good (2024) notes that although expectations and effectiveness research show that teachers influence student achievement, policymakers have often either ignored this body of work or used it to emphasize perceived teacher deficits rather than teacher strengths and contextual constraints.

Teacher Beliefs and Expectations

Building on the earlier definition of teacher expectations to explore how they are formed and enacted in classrooms. Research shows many general education teachers default to a deficit view. Cook (2002) found that disabled students were overrepresented among teachers' lists of concerns relative to their peers. Zohar et al. (2001) found that low-achieving students were often the recipients of low expectations from teachers who adhere to a top-down view of education. These teachers may also perceive higher-order thinking as inappropriate for such students. Further, Bull & Beard (1994) concluded that some teachers blame learning problems on students rather than instruction, consequently setting lower expectations for SWD. In contrast, some SPED teachers enacted higher expectations in practice, emphasizing individualized supports rather than presumed limits in ability (Lubbers et al., 2008).

Nonetheless, once a disability label is attached, academic expectations tend to fall. Research shows that both general and SPED teachers, regardless of the student's potential, tend to have lower expectations (Lubbers et al., 2008). Empirical studies indicate that low

expectations are more often directed toward SWD labels and those from minoritized groups, resulting in later negative consequences on academic and postsecondary opportunities (Brophy & Good, 1970; Lubbers et al., 2008; Papay, 2019). This can be intensified by factors such as socioeconomic status or a student's background (Morningstar & Benitez, 2013). Students identified as at-risk or labeled with emotional and behavioral disorders are especially vulnerable. Research shows they are held to lower expectations by their teachers (Papay et al., 2015).

Building on those findings, it is important to recognize that inclusion has broadened the footprint of teacher expectations. No longer confined to self-contained SPED classrooms, all students now share the same space. This could mean that the tone a teacher sets for one group of students can extend throughout the class. As inclusive classrooms become the default, the stakes of low expectations can escalate, affecting not only students who are labeled but also the whole class. Emerging research captures this ripple effect in inclusive classrooms, where teachers' low expectations for SWD may unintentionally "spill over" onto peers without disabilities, lowering average task demand and participation opportunities for the entire class (Szumski & Karwowski, 2019; Timmermans et al., 2016). These effects show a need for training teachers to set and communicate high expectations, avoiding biases that may shape peer perceptions. When teachers learn to recognize this "spill over," then they can deliver high expectations for all students.

One of the most foundational studies on teacher expectations and their influence on student outcomes is Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) Pygmalion in the Classroom. In this experimental study, conducted in a California elementary school serving primarily low-income, urban students, teachers were told that randomly selected students were expected to show rapid intellectual growth, labeled as "growth spurts." By the end of the year, these students from grades 1 through 6 (N = 320) demonstrated greater academic gains than their peers. A

standardized IQ test measured those gains, with Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) concluding that the teachers' altered perceptions and behaviors based solely on these fabricated expectations created a self-fulfilling prophecy called the Pygmalion Effect.

Pygmalion in the Classroom drew criticism. Scholars questioned its testing procedures, the credibility of the expectancy induction, and the generalizability of IQ gains (Timmermans et al., 2018). Those critiques pushed the field to tighten methods and clarify what counts as "expectations." This shifted attention from global IQ outcomes to the classroom processes through which expectations are communicated through task difficulty, opportunities to participate, questioning, and feedback (Brophy & Good, 1970; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). In turn, the literature treated expectancy effects as conditional rather than universal, emphasizing the believability of the induction and subgroup differences in impact (Timmermans et al., 2018; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Consistent with this trend, studies documented that higher expectations are linked to more challenging work and meaningful feedback, while lower expectations correspond to simpler tasks and fewer learning opportunities (Brophy & Good, 1970; Karwowski et al., 2015), with negative effects on students' self-perceptions, motivation, and engagement (Bohlmann & Weinstein, 2013; Hornstra et al., 2023). Recent reviews find small to moderate gains when teacher-expectation practices are intentionally developed, supporting a research agenda that foregrounds mechanisms and context (Timmermans et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018).

Following this study, research has traced how teacher expectations influence student outcomes (Brophy, 1983; Good, 2024; Wang et al., 2018). Good (2024) synthesizes more than five decades of teacher expectations and teacher effectiveness research, arguing that expectancy work must be interpreted alongside broader effectiveness findings and classroom complexity to

avoid oversimplified conclusions about teachers and achievement. Teachers tend to assign more challenging tasks to students they expect to succeed (Brophy & Good, 1970; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). On the other hand, students for whom teachers hold low expectations typically encounter reduced rigor, fewer opportunities to participate, and less feedback (Brophy & Good, 1970; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Timmermans et al., 2018). Those conditions are associated with weaker self-perceptions and engagement (Bohlmann & Weinstein, 2013; Karwowski et al., 2015). As Hornstra et al. (2023) observed, students' perceptions of their competence are often related to their autonomy.

Experimental studies in general education settings often report modest effects of teacher expectations. However, evidence suggests that students most vulnerable to teacher biases are more affected by negative teacher expectations (Gershenson et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2019). Research shows that the learning disability label lowers teachers' performance expectations and increases assumptions about future academic failure (Shifrer, 2013; Woodcock & Vialle, 2011). Similarly, students labeled with ADHD are often viewed less favorably by teachers, leading to reduced expectations for both behavior and academic success (Batzle et al., 2010; Milner, 2012). These lower expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies, sustaining negative academic patterns and limiting post-school outcomes.

Beyond single-year expectations, researchers asked, "Do early labels stick?" building on the Pygmalion Effect, Brophy and Good (1970; 1983) introduced the concept of "Sustaining Expectations," where teachers' initial beliefs about a student persist over time, even when new evidence suggests the student's capabilities have changed. Rather than adapting their expectations to reflect student growth, teachers may continue to view students through the lens of prior performance, unintentionally limiting growth opportunities (Brophy, 1983).

Low teacher expectations can negatively shape students' long-term goals by influencing track placement, for example, vocational vs. college prep (Timmermans et al., 2016), limiting access to rigorous coursework, and restricting post-school opportunities (Gershenson et al., 2016). Early low expectations often persist for marginalized and at-risk students, leading to lower graduation rates and reduced postsecondary success (Johnston et al., 2019; Van Houtte & Demanet, 2016). Further, Sorhagen (2013) found that lower expectations from teachers during early education can follow students throughout their school career, while Hinnant et al. (2009) observed that the relationship between expectations and learning outcomes seems to be more significant for at-risk students. For SWD, the implications of these lowered expectations can narrow diploma options and post-school opportunities (Wagner et al., 1996).

Research shows that low expectations track with higher dropout rates and weaker postsecondary outcomes (Johnston et al., 2019). Low teacher expectations are linked to higher dropout rates, while high expectations are associated with higher graduation and college enrollment rates (Gershenson et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2019). As Good (1987) observed, teachers' beliefs about students' futures influence the paths they promote, highlighting the potential role of expectations in shaping post-school outcomes for SWD (Timmermans et al., 2016). Teachers may hold lower academic expectations based on disability labels, often compounded by socioeconomic or cultural factors (Lubbers et al., 2008). Such lowered expectations can restrict access to transition planning, vocational training, and career exploration, directly impacting students' preparation for post-school success (Repetto et al., 2010; Kohler & Greene, 2004).

Together, the Pygmalion Effect and Sustaining Expectations lines of research converge on a central point: teacher beliefs drive student outcomes. The risks of sustaining low

expectations are amplified in virtual settings, where visibility and interactions are limited. Understanding these patterns is the first step toward strategies that help teachers communicate high expectations.

Factors Shaping Expectations

Early research on teacher expectations focused on traditional general education classrooms and typically examined global academic outcomes for nondisabled students (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). As this line of work developed, scholars began to examine how expectations operate for marginalized groups, including students with disabilities, and in inclusive settings. More recent research, such as Szumski and Karwowski (2019), has expanded this focus to inclusive classrooms, examining how expectations directed toward SWD can shape the broader learning environment. As IDEA (2004) mainstreamed more SWD, these students have gained access to inclusive classrooms. At the same time, it became evident that teacher expectations and related biases shape the opportunities available to students receiving special education services. These interactions help explain persistent disparities in access and achievement (Werner et al., 2021). Research shows SWD are vulnerable to lowered expectations, disability labels, and unconscious biases related to race, socioeconomic status, or behavior (Kashikar et al., 2023; Batzle et al., 2010).

These biases surface in subtle yet powerful ways, affecting instructional decisions, transition planning, and the opportunities for SWD. When left unaddressed, biased expectations can reinforce self-fulfilling prophecies, limiting access to rigorous coursework and shaping post-school options. Recognizing these risks, recent research emphasizes the importance of bias awareness and professional development in helping teachers adopt asset-based mindsets, hold high expectations, and develop equitable transition plans (Milner, 2012; Petretto et al., 2021;

Trainor & Romano, 2023). Similarly, Hanline et al. (2013) showed that teachers were most likely to implement new practices in the same areas where their competence increased, underscoring the link between professional learning, teacher expectations, and changes in instructional behavior.

Building on this understanding, subsequent research continued to probe how expectations shape student outcomes. Findings show these biases are systemic rather than incidental. Good (1987) highlighted that teachers may unconsciously hold lower expectations for students from low-income or racial-minority backgrounds. Such biases influence instructional decisions and can limit students' access to learning opportunities.

Expanding this understanding, Babad et al. (1982) introduced the Pygmalion, Galatea (positive), and Golem (negative) effects. This illustrates how teacher expectations can drive positive and negative self-fulfilling prophecies. The Galatea Effect occurs when students internalize positive expectations, thereby improving their performance. On the other hand, the Golem Effect emerges when negative expectations lower student motivation and achievement.

Rubie-Davies (2006) further demonstrated that these biases often manifest through differential treatment in classrooms where marginalized students receive fewer academic challenges and less support. Similarly, McKown and Weinstein (2008) found that compounded biases based on race, disability, and socioeconomic status shape teacher expectations, placing students with multiple marginalized identities at increased risk for low expectations. Collectively, these studies show how bias shapes teacher expectations and student outcomes. Such biases in SPED and transition planning are concerning, as they may restrict access to transition planning activities and hinder students' aspirations of post-school goals.

Rubie-Davies et al. (2015) identify three practices of high-expectation teachers. First, teachers utilize flexible grouping strategies and provide high-level learning tasks, ensuring that every student has access to a challenging curriculum regardless of perceived ability. Second, high-expectation teachers foster a warm, supportive socioemotional classroom climate by creating safe environments that encourage students to take risks and persevere through challenges. Finally, these teachers implement goal setting alongside clear, constructive feedback, empowering students to monitor their progress and develop confidence in their ability to succeed (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015).

These principles align with the earlier work proposed by Harris and Rosenthal (1985), the two-factor model of effort (opportunities) and affect (warmth). HET extends this work by offering a practical framework for how teachers can promote equity and student growth. Recent studies highlight high expectations as a countermeasure to bias. Rubie-Davies (2010b) and others (Babad et al., 1989; McKown & Weinstein, 2008) argued that when teachers set and communicate high expectations, they can disrupt negative cycles of low performance, often fueled by biases. HET reframes teachers as shapers, not reactors, of student outcomes through intentional, equitable practices. HET moves the conversation from spotting bias to equipping teachers with concrete, high-expectation strategies necessary for SPED contexts.

In transition planning, teachers often feel pressured to comply, which can lead to generic goals, weak service–goal alignment, and fewer authentic work-based experiences. When procedures outrun outcomes, plans slide into checklists and nudge attention toward deficits (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). By contrast, person-centered planning, which has students engaged as partners with goals across education, employment, and independent living, has been linked to higher graduation and goal attainment. However, it can be hard to sustain when family

schedules limit IEP attendance. Simple access fixes, such as conference-call participation, helped some families and kept students at the center (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

A growing body of research has examined how the quality of transition planning relates to post-school outcomes. Morningstar et al. (2012) identified several practices, such as involving students in planning their post-secondary goals. That coordinated collaboration was associated with stronger college, employment, and independent living outcomes for SWD. Recent work linking IDEA indicators 13 and 14 showed that higher-quality transition plans are associated with higher rates of postsecondary education and employment (Hennessey et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the importance of transition plans that extend beyond compliance and offer skill-building experiences that prepare students for adulthood.

Family engagement is another documented component of high-quality transition planning. Carlson et al. (2020) found that parents' involvement in the IEP process builds relational trust and improves families' engagement in SPED. Although this research does not address virtual schools directly, it highlights the importance of proactive communication between educators and parents during the transition planning phase.

Timmermans et al. (2018) highlighted the role of teacher-student relationships in shaping expectations. Teachers tend to hold higher expectations for students with whom they share close relationships. At the same time, students perceived as behaviorally challenging often receive lowered expectations (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). Hornstra et al. (2023) found that teachers' perceptions can also be impacted by individual school culture. Regardless of the overarching cause, these dynamics can affect how teachers approach transition planning for SWD. Alongside these cultural influences, school structures and professional norms add a second layer of

influence, such as large caseloads, compliance-driven timelines, and evaluation systems that reward paperwork over goal–service alignment.

School leadership, available resources, and professional development all shape teacher expectations. Systemic priorities and administrative support determine whether teachers can hold high expectations for all students (Wandry et al., 2008). For example, sustained, practice-embedded professional development can increase teachers' sense of competence and lead to concrete changes in instructional and planning practices. Hanline et al. (2013) found that teachers who completed a year-long online program in severe disabilities reported applying course content in their classrooms and implementing new evidence-based practices in areas where their perceived competence had grown. However, many teacher preparation programs fail to build competencies in transition services. Under-preparation lowers teacher confidence and, in turn, expectations, especially when post-school planning feels overwhelming. How these systems play out depends heavily on the setting. Recent evidence indicates that teachers who feel more competent in transition planning are better able to translate high expectations into actionable plans (De Arao & Fontanilla, 2024).

Teacher Expectations in Traditional vs. Virtual

Teacher expectations play out differently in traditional and virtual settings. Those differences matter for transition planning. Pinpointing the gap clarifies how expectation guides post-school outcomes. While research on teacher expectations has historically focused on traditional, in-person classroom settings, the rise of virtual schools presents new challenges and considerations for how expectations are formed, communicated, and sustained. Differences in instructional delivery, student-teacher interactions, and access to resources may shape expectations in virtual environments.

Studies have documented that online learning environments reduce access to informal cues that usually support relationship building and real-time instructional adjustments when needed (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Rice, 2018). Reduced cues can place greater weight on written communication, clarity of instructions, and being intentional when communicating tasks that must be completed in a specific order. Teachers must make expectation signals visible to students in the virtual setting. For SWD, this shows the importance of structured communication and guidance during the transition planning.

In traditional in-person classrooms, teacher expectations are shaped by a combination of student demographics, observed behaviors, academic history, and, at times, implicit stereotypes (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). These expectations influence how teachers interact with students, structure instruction, and allocate learning opportunities, often resulting in self-fulfilling prophecies that impact academic achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Jussim and Harber (2005) recommended further research to explore the connection between this effect and social problems. Teachers may unconsciously provide more encouragement, wait time, or detailed feedback to students they perceive as capable, while giving less attention or challenge to those they deem less likely to succeed (Babad et al., 1989; Rubie-Davies, 2006).

Research shows that some teachers hold on to judgments formed from students' past performance. These "sustaining expectations" can mask current growth, cap student progress, and, when internalized by the student, drain motivation, widening the achievement gaps (Brophy & Good, 1970; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). A student who once struggled with multi-step problems may continue to receive single-step worksheets long after the skill gap has closed.

Disability labels cause issues that build into bigger problems. Shifrer (2013) found that attaching the "Learning Disability" label often leads to students facing reduced expectations

throughout their education. Recent work expands this pattern by showing that expectations and transition opportunities are shaped not only by disability labels but by broader educational structures. Alfawzan and Almulhim (2024) found that weak transition goals, limited academic expectations, and inadequate teacher preparation created barriers to post-school success for students with intellectual disabilities, contributing to vocational and educational outcomes that remained far below those of their peers. Their review identified low expectations, limited skill-based instruction, and inconsistent family engagement as systemic obstacles. Once a label is attached, teachers often lower expectations and assign simpler tasks (Woodcock & Vialle, 2011; Kashikar et al., 2023). In transition planning, this can mean swapping a budget for a basic "count change" worksheet, thereby depriving the student of grade-level content and real-world practice. Each lowered demand tightens the low-expectations loops and pushes true college and career readiness further out of reach. Communication of expectations occurs not only through direct feedback but also through nonverbal cues, classroom grouping, and the level of academic work presented (Babad et al., 1989). Teacher beliefs and prior training shape how those signals are set and sustained (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). For example, Rubie-Davies (2006) found that teachers with low class-level expectations reported lower student outcomes.

Milner (2012) perceived a need to deemphasize traditional assessment-based learning frameworks in favor of a more inclusive, individualized approach to learning. For example, in an inclusive classroom, the very act of seating a SWD in a corner by themself and assigning that individual a modified worksheet sends a quiet but powerful message about who is expected to tackle harder tasks. Just as classroom cues broadcast expectations in a brick-and-mortar environment, the absence of those cues in an online environment forces teachers to rethink how they judge student potential.

Virtual environments hinder the cues teachers usually use to set expectations. With cameras off and hallway chatter gone, teachers rely on gradebooks and participation logs to judge student engagement. (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Rice, 2018). This shift may increase the risk of expectations being influenced by pre-existing assumptions or stereotypes. The stakes are higher during transition planning; without hallway rapport, a single missing assignment can lower a student's post-school trajectory.

In brick-and-mortar classrooms, teachers look for nonverbal cues to gauge motivation and ability. However, in virtual settings, these nonverbal signals are often reduced, leaving teachers to rely on guesswork. Babad, Bernieri, and Rosenthal (1989) demonstrated that a raised eyebrow or a half-smile can reveal a teacher's expectations, even in silence. The absence of those cues online may lead to misinterpretations or reinforce existing biases. This lack of visibility in students' engagement further complicates the development of high expectations.

A single virtual teacher can carry 150+ students, too many screens to know each student well or keep expectations high (Hashey & Stahl, 2014). Molnar et al. (2021) found that despite education experts' emphasis on active engagement between teachers, parents, and students to help set expectations and keep track of performance, larger class sizes have become the standard in many virtual learning environments, with teachers mitigating these challenges through an over-reliance on self-paced and automated learning tools.

Challenges in collaboration with general education teachers, inconsistent use of digital platforms, and limited shared planning time can also impact how expectations are formed and communicated across teams (Wandry et al., 2008). Moreover, inadequate preparation for virtual instruction and teachers' unfamiliarity with online tools push many SPED teachers to set safer,

attainable goals for students, especially when faced with tech barriers or limited family support (Blanchett, 2001).

Despite the challenges, virtual environments are not all bad for SPED learning. The virtual format can reshape how teachers, students, and families interact. These platforms can also offer opportunities for personalized instruction through adaptive technologies and on-demand resources. When used well, these tools can support the high expectations and pull SWD into rigorous academic content (Hashey & Stahl, 2014; Repetto et al., 2010). In many cases, online instruction increases the importance of family engagement because parents often act as the bridge between school expectations and what students complete at home. Research on virtual learning environments shows that online models shift more instructional responsibility onto the parents. Studies have noted that teachers often depend on families to help students access materials, monitor progress, and stay connected, but that this support varies widely across households (Ford et al., 2021; Hamlin et al., 2023).

Tonks et al. (2021) further highlighted the uneven distribution of family responsibilities in virtual settings, noting that parents often bear the instructional burden of monitoring progress, assisting with assignments, and troubleshooting technology. Families reported that this increased responsibility varied depending on work schedules, digital literacy, and home resources, creating inequities in students' ability to stay engaged. In addition, research on digital communication highlights that low-barrier tools can strengthen interactions with families (Elias et al., 2022), suggesting that virtual learning increases the need for family engagement and makes caregiver partnership a condition for sustaining expectations and progress online.

At the same time, virtual schooling raises broader equity issues that influence how families engage with transition planning. Access to technology, reliable internet, and family

availability vary across socioeconomic and cultural contexts, which creates conditions that can either support or hinder students' opportunities to participate in virtual models (Reimer & Hill, 2022; Molnar et al., 2021). Evidence illustrates that family partnership remains a factor in transition planning, regardless of setting. In their review, Alfawzan and Almulhim (2024) identified family overprotection, limited awareness of transition rights, and inconsistent collaboration with schools as barriers to transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. Trainor and Romano (2023) found that families often engage in transition planning outside school in ways educators often do not recognize, revealing inconsistencies between home and school expectations. Their findings show that family knowledge, cultural context, and informal planning efforts can shape student aspirations and opportunities, even when these are invisible to the school.

Transition Planning and Communication

Transition planning is a student-centered process designed to prepare SWD for post-school outcomes, including further education, employment, and independent living (IDEA, 2004; Papay et al., 2015). Transition planning is a comprehensive team effort that connects students' dreams, strengths, and preferences to actionable goals, ensuring they are equipped to participate in their communities (IEP Guide, n.d.). This process should begin early, ideally by eighth grade, with a gradual planning of career and college awareness throughout high school rather than waiting until senior year.

Effective transition planning is built on these components: focused planning, student development, interagency collaboration, family engagement, and program structure (Blanchett, 2001). A central element is conducting ongoing, age-appropriate transition assessments to identify each student's skills, interests, and needs across academic, behavioral, and vocational

domains. The results guide instruction, align transition activities with students' long-term goals, and inform the development of measurable postsecondary objectives. These objectives, required under IDEA (2004), must address education, employment, independent living, and community participation, areas shown to predict positive post-school outcomes when integrated into students' IEPs (Papay et al., 2015; McConnell et al., 2017). Even when evidence-based practices are available, teachers report difficulty adopting and sustaining them in day-to-day instruction (Cook & Odom, 2013). In addition, differences in educators' ability to interpret and use assessment and progress data can hinder instructional and transition decisions (Datnow & Hubbard, 2016).

Career readiness is tied to transition planning. Beyond academic proficiency, it includes non-academic skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability, which are essential for success in employment and postsecondary settings (McConnell et al., 2017). Career exploration, awareness, and hands-on work experiences should begin early and expand throughout a student's academic journey (Morningstar & Mazzotti, 2014). Embedding career-focused curriculum and functional academics, including career and technical education (CTE) courses, improves employment outcomes for SWD (Blanchett, 2001). Additionally, clear instruction in employment-seeking skills such as resume writing and interview preparation is important, particularly when tailored to students' developmental needs and functional limitations (McConnell et al., 2017).

Communication is the foundation of effective transition planning. It ensures that all stakeholders, like students, families, special and general education teachers, community partners, and adult service agencies, collaborate to support students' postsecondary goals (Papay & Bambara, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Teachers must create culturally

competent plans, engaging families as key partners while navigating challenges such as conflicting terminology, limited shared planning time, and role confusion between team members (Blanchett, 2001; Allam & Martin, 2021). Miscommunication can hinder the effectiveness of transition services and reduce access to important career-readiness activities.

Teacher preparation is needed to overcome these challenges. Research highlights the need for preservice and practicing SPED teachers to develop competencies in active listening, collaboration, and culturally responsive transition planning (Brown et al., 2008). Teachers must communicate high expectations, avoiding deficit-based mindsets that limit students' aspirations and access to academic and vocational opportunities (Hashey & Stahl, 2014). Effective transition planning is a dynamic, lifelong process requiring intentional communication, student voice, and alignment of educational programming with postsecondary goals. It is assumed that in virtual schools, clear and frequent communication about the purpose and value of transition activities is even more needed for fostering student motivation, self-determination, and career readiness (Repetto et al., 2010).

Transition services are essential for supporting SWD as they prepare for adulthood, post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. Federal mandates, including the IDEA (2004), require transition planning that begins no later than age 16 and incorporates measurable postsecondary goals based on students' strengths, preferences, and interests (Powers et al., 2005). This legal framework ensures that transition services are a coordinated, results-oriented process that facilitates students' movement from school to post-school activities while promoting self-determination and independence.

Research further suggests that teacher expectations directly influence the quality and ambition of students' IEP transition goals, highlighting the importance of maintaining high

expectations during transition planning (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Strong transition plans that connect academic learning to postsecondary and career goals help students develop the skills needed for employment, education, and community participation (Papay et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Additionally, family engagement and interagency collaboration strengthen these outcomes, as students whose families participate in transition planning are more likely to experience positive post-school success, including employment (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Papay & Bambara, 2013). Ultimately, transition services grounded in high expectations empower SWD to achieve meaningful adult outcomes and participate fully in their communities.

Effectively communicating the value of learning tasks is important in virtual environments. According to EVT, students are more motivated to engage when they perceive tasks as meaningful and connected to their goals (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Fong & Kremer, 2020). This alignment becomes even more essential in virtual settings, where autonomy is heightened.

Emerging technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and interactive gaming platforms have expanded educators' ability to convey relevance and engagement. These tools enable immersive experiences that promote motivation (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Additionally, virtual manipulatives and computer-assisted instruction support engagement, communicating that participation and exploration are valuable components of the learning process (Hashey & Stahl, 2014).

Frequent check-ins, real-world examples, and connecting learning to student interests are strategies for increasing perceived task value (Haber et al., 2016). Teachers must intentionally create these connections in virtual environments to bridge the gap caused by limited face-to-face interaction. Explicitly relating tasks to future goals, such as careers or independent living, helps

students recognize the real-world relevance of their work (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Fong & Kremer, 2020).

Feedback mechanisms in virtual settings are also needed to reinforce value and expectations. Research indicates that feedback focused on ideas rather than surface-level corrections builds students' confidence and promotes persistence (Petretto et al., 2021; Trainor & Romano, 2023). Motivating feedback is impactful in asynchronous online settings where opportunities for immediate clarification are limited (Gentrup et al., 2020). However, virtual environments also introduce digital barriers to the communication of value. The absence of nonverbal cues, inconsistent access to technology, and limited real-time interaction can hamper teachers' ability to communicate the importance of tasks (Petretto et al., 2021; Trainor & Romano, 2023). Without intentional strategies, students may struggle to see the relevance of assignments, which can reduce motivation and engagement.

Personalized learning opportunities, such as tailored transition planning, embedded career skills, and assistive technologies, help overcome these barriers. For example, integrating augmentative and alternative communication systems allows students with needs to engage meaningfully, reinforcing their value within the virtual classroom (Hashey & Stahl, 2014). Communicating value in virtual settings requires strategies combining engaging technologies and personalized support. By leveraging virtual tools and addressing digital barriers, teachers can foster motivation, engagement, and a sense of purpose for SWD navigating online learning.

Barriers and Equity Concerns

Equity barriers constrain SWD transition outcomes. Under-resourced schools often face SPED staffing shortages, thin career-readiness options, and transportation gaps, reducing access to rigorous courses and authentic experiences (Grossi & Thomas, 2017). Financial constraints

also limit access to assistive technology and other supports (Allam & Martin, 2021). Teachers' expectations can reinforce these patterns via placement and course-access decisions (Kashikar et al., 2023). Compliance pressure can hinder transition plans into generic checklists, weakening goal–service alignment and limiting authentic work experiences. Person-centered planning, in which students actively shape goals in education, employment, and independent living, improves graduation and goal attainment but requires flexible participation options (e.g., conference calls) to prevent students from being excluded when caregivers cannot attend (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

Engaging families in transition planning is often under-addressed. Parental involvement can improve post-school outcomes, yet barriers hinder effective family engagement (Papay & Bambara, 2013). Mazzotti et al. (2016) also emphasized family engagement in their examination of predictors of career readiness. Without participation, transition plans may fail to align with students' families' expectations. Systemic barriers, including racism, classism, and ableism, further marginalize families and reduce their influence in school-based decision-making processes (Kohler, 1996). These barriers contribute to persistent equity concerns in SPED and transition planning. The focus on "achievement gaps" often masks deeper "opportunity gaps", disparities in access to resources, rigorous instruction, and postsecondary pathways for students of color, low-income students, and those with disabilities (Milner, 2012; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Trainor and Romano (2023) argue that postschool disparities persist because transition systems rarely attend to the compounded marginalizations that shape students' opportunities. Their work underscores that transition planning must account for how multiple identities structure access to resources, expectations, and supports.

Students of color continue to be disproportionately represented in SPED while remaining underrepresented in advanced academic programs, a pattern that reflects enduring systemic racial biases in teacher expectations and placement practices (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). Similarly, gender-based stereotypes and deficit perspectives limit opportunities for girls in STEM or boys in literacy (McConnell et al., 2017). For SWD, IEP teams too often must choose between standards-based academic programs and community-based functional life skills programs, narrowing postsecondary opportunities and reinforcing inequities (Papay et al., 2015). Biases in assessments and evaluations compound these issues. Tests normed on majority populations often fail to account for culturally or linguistically diverse experiences, leading to inappropriate SPED placements and eligibility decisions (Johnston et al., 2019; Murdock-Perriera & Sedlacek, 2018). These barriers are most evident during transition planning, which limits a student's access to meaningful career-readiness activities (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Grossi & Thomas, 2017). Students from marginalized groups are also less likely to participate in authentic work experiences, a key predictor of post-school success (Trainor et al., 2020).

Virtual learning can further widen these gaps. The digital divide restricts access to online transition resources, while reduced face-to-face interaction weakens the communication of high expectations and value for learning (Petretto et al., 2021; Trainor & Romano, 2023). Teachers unprepared to navigate these platforms may struggle to engage students or connect transition activities to real-world applications. Addressing these barriers is needed for equity in SPED and transition planning. Shifting from a deficit focus to an understanding of opportunity gaps can ensure that all students receive high-quality transition services. Targeted professional development, culturally responsive family engagement, and equitable resource allocation are

necessary to fulfill the promise of IDEA's mandates for postsecondary success (Powers et al., 2005).

Research Gaps and Rationale

While the existing literature provides insight into teacher expectations, transition predictors, parent engagement, and virtual schooling, several gaps remain. Few studies examine how virtual SPED teachers form, communicate, and enact expectations during transition planning, despite evidence that expectation signals function differently in online environments. Research on virtual learning highlights the importance of family involvement, yet little is known about how teachers navigate these dynamics when planning postschool goals. No studies integrate the Pygmalion Effect, HET, and EVT to explore how teacher beliefs and communication practices shape transition planning in virtual schools. This study addresses these gaps by examining SPED teachers' perceptions, communication strategies, and supports and barriers in a virtual setting.

Relatedly, evidence on how placement and context intersect with expectation processes for students with learning difficulties is limited (Trautner & Schwinger, 2018). Equity concerns remain under-addressed, yet few studies probe how deficit thinking or low expectations shape their postsecondary trajectories (Grossi & Thomas, 2017). Further, Trainor and Romano (2023) note that transition research seldom integrates intersectionality as a methodological lens, leaving gaps in how researchers understand the compounded inequities shaping students' experiences. Their call for more reflexive, equity-centered transition research parallels the present study's focus on teacher expectations in a virtual context. While EVT has been widely applied to student motivation, empirical work directly linking teacher expectations to postsecondary transition planning is comparatively thin (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Trainor et al., 2020). Although HET

offers a practical framework, research rarely details how teachers enact and communicate high expectations in transition planning online (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010).

Addressing these gaps matters because teacher expectations shape the quality of IEPs and the ambition of postsecondary goals. This study of SPED teachers in a virtual charter school explores how expectations are formed, communicated, and linked to transition outcomes, informing teacher training, asset-based practice, and services that better prepare SWD for post-school success.

Significance of the Study

While Chapter One outlined the significance of understanding teacher expectations in a virtual school with a focus on SPED teachers preparing students for transition planning, this section focused on the contribution this study makes to the existing body of research. Literature confirms that teacher expectations influence student motivation, engagement, and outcomes (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). High expectations create student confidence, self-efficacy, and persistence, while low expectations contribute to disengagement and diminished postsecondary success (Gershenson et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2019). Yet very little research in that field considers how expectations operate during online transition planning (Rice, 2018).

By focusing on a full-time virtual charter school, this study addresses a gap in transition planning literature and makes three contributions. First, it identifies the communication practices, virtual routines, and relationship-building techniques that SPED teachers described using to support engagement in transition planning. Those practices identified could be built into professional development. Second, the findings provide state agencies with context-specific

indicators for evaluating the fidelity of virtual transition services, thereby holding schools accountable for achieving postsecondary goals. Third, by applying the Pygmalion Effect, HET, and EVT to virtual transition planning, the study extends motivation frameworks into an understudied domain and provides a qualitative dataset for further research. Together, these contributions provide a theoretical understanding of how SPED teachers perceive and communicate expectations.

Summary

Teacher expectations and communication practices shape student motivation, engagement, and long-term outcomes. Decades of research have demonstrated that high teacher expectations have a positive influence on both academic and socio-emotional development (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Timmermans, 2016). These effects are important in virtual learning, where reduced interaction and limited feedback may amplify the impact of teacher beliefs and behaviors on student experiences (Petretto et al., 2021; Trainor & Romano, 2023).

While existing research examines the general influence of teacher expectations, few studies examine how these expectations are communicated and enacted in the context of transition planning for students in a virtual charter school. Transition services, required under IDEA, are designed to prepare students for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. In virtual settings, communicating the purpose and value of transition activities is necessary to foster student self-efficacy and ensure equitable access to career-readiness opportunities (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Papay et al., 2015).

Three interrelated theoretical frameworks guide this study. These frameworks provide guiding concepts for the analysis. Differences in how teachers formulate and communicate expectations are treated as analytical patterns and interpreted through these lenses. Together,

these frameworks provide a lens for exploring how teacher beliefs and communication strategies are described in relation to students' motivation and engagement. This theoretical alignment offers continuity with the study's purpose and research questions outlined in Chapter 1 and informs the methodology described in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the interplay of teacher expectations, communication, and student outcomes requires grounding this study in well-established theoretical frameworks. This study integrates three theoretical frameworks to examine teacher expectations in transition planning for SWD in a virtual charter school. First, the Pygmalion Effect explains how teachers' internal expectations subtly yet powerfully shape students' self-perceptions and outcomes, suggesting expectations themselves can become self-fulfilling (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Building on this, Rubie-Davies et al. (2015) outlined the High Expectations Theory (HET), which extends the notion of expectations beyond passive beliefs to encompass active instructional strategies. HET emphasizes that high expectations must not only be held internally (Pygmalion) but also communicated through instructional decisions, proactive feedback, and equitable practices (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). Finally, the Expectancy-Value Theory provides a framework to understand how communication of expectations influences students' motivation. EVT explains how students interpret teachers' explicit and implicit messages about their potential and the relevance of tasks to shape their motivation and engagement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). In other words, EVT completes the cycle initiated by teachers' internal beliefs (Pygmalion) and actively communicated strategies (HET), theoretically influencing students' motivational engagement in transition planning activities.

Because this study draws on teacher interviews, references to how the communication of expectations influences students' motivation are examined indirectly, through teachers' perceptions of students' engagement and task-value signals. EVT is therefore applied as an interpretive lens for teacher-reported indicators rather than as a direct measure of student

motivation collected from students themselves. The study is anchored in a constructivist perspective, viewing expectations as meanings co-constructed through digital interactions rather than fixed teacher attributes. By integrating these frameworks, this study explores the process of expectation formation, communication, and student motivation, identifying practices for improving SWD post-high school outcomes.

The Pygmalion Effect and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The idea that expectations can create reality dates back to Merton's (1948) formulation of the self-fulfilling prophecy, later popularized in education by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). The Pygmalion Effect describes how teachers' beliefs about their students' potential influence student outcomes through self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In their seminal experiment, Rosenthal and Jacobson showed that when teachers believed certain students were poised for academic growth, those students demonstrated intellectual gains compared to their peers. This mechanism involves teachers forming expectations, consciously or unconsciously communicating them through instructional practices, student-teacher interactions, feedback, and emotional support, thereby influencing students' behaviors, motivation, and performance (Brophy, 1983; Jussim & Harber, 2005).

Subsequent research expanded the initial findings, emphasizing how differences in teachers' interactions, such as variations in questioning patterns, instructional rigor, and supportive feedback, contribute to significant disparities in student outcomes (Brophy & Good, 1970; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Even when teachers control their language, expectancy bias can 'leak' through facial expressions and body posture, and teachers may not knowingly signal lower expectations for some students (Babad et al., 1989). The effect extends beyond mere accuracy in teacher judgment of students' abilities; it encompasses situations in which biased

expectations impact marginalized students (McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Shifrer, 2013). For SWD, lowered expectations are concerned due to prevalent deficit-based labels and stereotypes, potentially leading to reduced access to rigorous curriculum and limited postsecondary planning opportunities (Kashikar et al., 2023; Woodcock & Vialle, 2011).

As outlined in Table 1, the Pygmalion Effect translates to the virtual setting through both the implicit and explicit expectations of virtual teachers, improving motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, and overall transition success. However, in virtual education settings, reduced face-to-face interactions may amplify the negative aspects of teacher expectations. Teachers, lacking regular direct interactions, may struggle to adjust biased initial perceptions, potentially intensifying these expectancy effects and further constraining SWD postsecondary preparation and engagement in transition activities (Petretto et al., 2021).

A qualitative study by Niari et al. (2016) found that, in a tutoring setting integrating phone calls, face-to-face contact, and writing, students were most affected by their tutors' nonverbal encouragement and support. Examples of verbal behavior included calling students by their first names and using encouraging phrases, superlative adjectives, and first-person plural. Examples of non-verbal behavior included positive facial expressions such as laughter and smiling, many gestures, and frequent eye contact (Niari et al., 2016).

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT)

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) posits that an individual's motivation and engagement in tasks are driven by two key components: expectancy, which refers to the belief in one's likelihood of succeeding in the task, and value, which refers to the perceived importance and relevance of the task itself (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). In other words, if a student sees a task as

worth doing and believes he or she will succeed, the EVT framework predicts a higher success rate.

While initially formulated to explain student motivation, EVT applies to teachers' decision-making processes regarding instructional priorities, including transition planning and career readiness activities. Under the EVT framework, the concept of self-efficacy, or a student's belief in his or her own ability to complete certain goals, is important to student success (Zimmerman, 2017). As the author noted, self-efficacy can be multi-dimensional and extend beyond a student's academic goals to their ability to navigate relationships with fellow learners and teachers.

Under the umbrella of value, Cooper et al. (2017) conceived three distinct reasons for students' assignment of value to a task. The first, *attainment value,* connects high performance on a given task to the student's sense of identity. Under *intrinsic value*, the task in and of itself contains value simply because a student enjoys doing it. Under *utility value*, the value assigned to a task derives from a student's awareness of that task's relationship to a goal either currently or in the future (Cooper et al., 2017).

Within the context of special education, expectancy beliefs can affect both student engagement and teacher instructional strategies. Teachers who hold low expectancy beliefs for SWD may inadvertently limit these students' opportunities, challenge, and support, thus negatively affecting their motivation, participation, and long-term outcomes (Timmermans et al., 2016). In virtual learning environments, these issues can become more pronounced, as teachers may struggle to gauge students' visible effort and active engagement, potentially exacerbating low expectancy perceptions (Petretto et al., 2021).

The task value component, comprising intrinsic interest, utility, and perceived relevance, is needed for meaningful engagement and motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). When transition planning and career readiness activities are not prioritized or implemented with fidelity, students may miss opportunities for meaningful engagement and motivation (Haber et al., 2016). This issue is important in virtual contexts, where digital barriers can inhibit effective communication of task relevance and real-world connections. Teachers in virtual settings must proactively incorporate frequent check-ins, personalized communications, and connections to students' future aspirations and interests to ensure tasks are perceived as relevant and valuable (Fong & Kremer, 2020; Shang et al., 2023). Thus, EVT provides a framework for examining how teacher expectations and value communication are perceived by teachers to influence students' motivation and engagement.

High Expectations Theory (HET)

High Expectations Theory (HET) extends beyond the implicit effects described by the Pygmalion Effect by advocating intentional, proactive teaching strategies to promote equitable and enhanced student outcomes (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). Within their framework, the authors identified three key practices characteristic of high-expectation teachers: (a) flexible grouping and consistently high-level instructional tasks, ensuring all students access a challenging curriculum; (b) fostering a supportive socioemotional environment that encourages risk-taking, persistence, and positive relationships; and (c) explicit goal-setting accompanied by clear, constructive feedback, empowering students to track progress and build self-efficacy (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015).

These practices align closely with Harris and Rosenthal's (1985) two-factor expectancy model, emphasizing both instructional effort (the complexity and rigor of the learning tasks

provided) and affective warmth (emotional support and encouragement). However, HET emphasizes proactive, deliberate strategies that explicitly promote high expectations for every student, making it particularly relevant for special education settings, where historically lowered expectations have limited students' opportunities and outcomes (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

Empirical studies confirm that teachers who maintain intentionally high expectations tend to set more ambitious transition goals, provide rigorous career-readiness activities, and ensure equitable access to academic content for SWD (Mazzotti et al., 2016). For virtual schools, applying HET involves intentional practices such as regular virtual check-ins, individualized feedback loops, structured digital communication strategies, and verbal affirmations of student capabilities. These strategies ensure that students internalize high expectations and persist through challenges in virtual settings (Hashey & Stahl, 2014). To this end, as Molnar et al. (2021) determined, career readiness has become increasingly common as an assessment measure.

Collectively, these theoretical frameworks inform this study's investigation of how SPED teachers' expectations shape their perceptions, communication, and implementation of transition planning within a virtual charter school. They offer a foundation for analyzing motivational dynamics, emphasizing teachers' roles in fostering high expectations that drive meaningful student engagement, motivation, and long-term success.

Across the three frameworks, "teacher expectations" operate differently. Table 1 adds a column that defines "teacher expectations" for each theory and cross-walks those definitions to the specific expectation signals and routines analyzed in a virtual context.

Table 1

Overview of Theoretical Frameworks

Theory	How does this theory define "teacher expectations"	Application	Student-level
Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968)	Teachers' beliefs about a student's potential that, when signaled, shape opportunities, feedback, and task demand, creating self-fulfilling prophecies.	Trace belief, action (e.g., rigor maintained, specific feedback, warm climate) and the expectation signals teachers send in virtual interactions.	Higher/lower motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement as perceived by teachers.
Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002)	Expectations operate through messages teachers give about students' likely success (expectancy) and why a task matters (value)—competence cues + value framing that shape motivation.	Look for value framing (e.g., money/ independence/career links) and feed-forward steps that raise expectancy in online settings.	Increased persistence, responsiveness, and perceived relevance.
High Expectations Theory (Rubies-Davie et al., 2015)	Expectations are not only beliefs; they are deliberately enacted through challenging tasks, a warm climate, and explicit goals/feedback so that all students experience high expectations.	Document proactive routines (e.g., regular check-ins, stepwise guidance, flexible structures) that keep rigor high and access wide online.	Greater equity/inclusion and postsecondary preparedness.

Note: The "Student-level" column lists theory-predicted constructs that function as analytic targets in this study.

Limitations of Theoretical Frameworks

These frameworks provide a lens for exploring how teacher expectations are formed, communicated, and linked to motivation. The Pygmalion Effect, EVT, and HET focus on beliefs, instructional actions, and perceived motivation (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). In this study, they are applied through the lens of teacher perspectives. As a result, emotional readiness and ongoing mental-health needs appear in the findings as contextual conditions that shape how students experience and respond to expectation signals. However, they fall outside the scope of these frameworks. In this study, mental health and emotional regulation are treated as prerequisites for students to participate in transition planning, not as constructs defined within the three theories. The theoretical framework is used

to interpret how teachers describe expectation signals, value framing, and high-expectation routines. At the same time, noting that the emotional readiness sits alongside, rather than inside, what these models explain.

CHAPTER 4

METHOD

This study employs a basic qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and semi-structured interviews to explore how SPED teachers in a virtual charter school perceive and communicate about post-high school transition activities. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of teachers' expectations, instructional decisions, and perceived barriers in virtual settings. The study is grounded in three theories that frame how teacher expectations influence student outcomes. Consistent with a constructivist epistemology (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019), this study suggests that teachers construct meaning through their experiences, interactions, and interpretations of students' abilities. A qualitative interview-based study was selected because it enables researchers to capture descriptive accounts of teacher expectations and how these expectations influence transition planning in virtual learning. By centering teachers' perspectives, this study seeks to go beyond compliance-driven transition planning to examine how teachers actively shape career readiness, postsecondary goal-setting, and independent living skills for SWD. Throughout, references to student "motivation" or "engagement" denote teachers' interpretations of those constructs as observed in transition interactions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do SPED teachers perceive the value and purpose of post-high school transition activities for SWD in a virtual charter school?
2. How do SPED teachers communicate the value and purpose of post-high school transition activities for SWD in a virtual charter school?

3. What supports and challenges do SPED teachers report about transition activities for SWD in a virtual charter school?

Setting

This study was conducted within Virtual Learning Academy (VLA), a fully accredited K–12 online public school. VLA is a tuition-free virtual charter school serving students in all 77 counties in Oklahoma. It provides a flexible, internet-based educational experience tailored to individual student needs, with instruction delivered by certified teachers (Virtual Learning Academy, 2023). VLA serves a diverse student population; in the 2022–2023 academic year, 65.14% of students were classified as economically disadvantaged (Virtual Learning Academy, 2023). The racial/ethnic composition was 53.36% White, 19.98% Two or More Races, 6.17% American Indian/Alaska Native, 5.77% Black or African American, 4.13% Hispanic, and 0.52% Asian (Oklahoma School Report Cards, 2024). In FY2024, total enrollment was 27,054 (OSDE, 2024a).

In FY2024, 22.43% of students enrolled had IEPs. Within the IDEA disability categories, the largest groups were Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Other Health Impairment (OHI), and Autism. SLD accounted for 36.91% of the students with IEPs. Followed by OHI, with 25.56%, and Autism, with 13.86% of the students. These three categories comprise over 75% of the students served with IEPs. The remaining categories were smaller in proportion: Emotional Disturbance (ED) included 7.76% of students, Speech/Language Impairment (SLI) included 6.51% of students, and Intellectual Disabilities included 6.20% of students. Counts for Deaf-Blindness were suppressed due to the low count (OSDE, 2024a). Among students with IEPs, OSDE reported the following makeup: White 51.90%, Two or More Races 21.16%, Hispanic 11.63%, Black/African American 7.53%, American Indian/Alaska Native 7.37%, Asian 0.36%,

and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 0.05%. The male student population comprised 59.24% (OSDE, 2024a). This distribution emphasizes the heterogeneity of students receiving special education services.

The educational environment provides an indicator of service intensity at the site. OSDE reports that 96.84% of VLA students with IEPs were educated in the regular education class for ≥80% of the day, 0.41% were in the regular education class for <40% of the day, and 0.43% were served in separate or residential settings. There was a small remainder of students served in other placements not itemized in the public table (OSDE, 2024a). The distributions indicate that many students are served for at least 80% of the day in general education, with a small proportion in settings associated with more intensive services.

VLA operates through an online instructional model in which students complete most coursework asynchronously and engage in synchronous support through scheduled Zoom meetings, phone calls, or messaging. As an online charter school, VLA relies on digital tools to maintain ongoing contact with students and families. General education teachers manage multiple course sections across all grades, K–12, with rosters typically ranging from 25 to 40 students. In contrast, SPED teachers are assigned a blend of general education courses and special education caseloads, with roughly 60% of their students receiving SPED services and 40% general education only, and carry rosters of approximately 25 to 35 students. SPED teachers assume the same instructional responsibilities as general education teachers for their assigned courses and grade levels and, in addition, are responsible for IEP development, progress monitoring, transition planning, and coordinating services. Students are assigned to teachers within roughly a 30–60-mile radius so that teachers can arrange in-person meetings, community-based instruction, or transition-related events. However, when no local teacher is available,

students are served entirely virtually, with all contact, instruction, and transition support occurring online. Because the vast majority of SWD are educated in general education settings for ≥80% of the school day, much of this work occurs within general education courses and through supplemental supports. In this environment, communication becomes the primary mechanism for supporting students.

Participants

Participants in this study were VLA SPED teachers directly involved in postsecondary transition planning for SWD. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (a) be current SPED teachers at VLA, (b) have at least one year of experience teaching in a virtual setting, and (c) be actively engaged in high school transition planning. Recruitment emails were sent to all eligible SPED teachers engaged in transition planning, and interviews were completed with those who consented. Any variation in grade bands, experience, or caseloads arose naturally from the respondent pool. Patterns in expectations and communication were then developed analytically from interview data and interpreted through the study's theoretical lenses.

VLA uses an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) to organize goal setting and expectation-setting at the student level. The ILP documents academic and transition goals, success criteria, and planned supports. In a virtual model, the ILP serves as a shared document that clarifies expectations, supporting the study's focus on how expectations are communicated. AT VLA, these ILP meetings are held once a year and help teachers narrate task value and calibrate challenge, which participants described as central to student buy-in and engagement.

Table 2 provides an overview of the nine participants in this study, all of whom were SPED teachers at VLA engaged in high school transition planning. This study was designed for depth within a bounded, conceptually aligned virtual setting rather than breadth across multiple

schools. VLA was selected because its online transition routines align directly with the study's frameworks and research questions. Participants brought diverse professional experiences, ranging from early career to veteran educators, with several having extensive backgrounds in SPED instruction across both traditional and virtual settings. While exact years of experience varied, all met the inclusion criteria and offered insight into supporting SWD in virtual settings. Each pseudonym represents a unique voice that contributed to the study's thematic findings.

Across the participants, years of teacher experience, prior exposure to virtual instruction, and caseload sizes varied. Some teachers had more than a decade of classroom experience and multiple years at VLA, while others were newer to the profession or to virtual schools. Teachers described different levels of comfort with the virtual platforms and differing access to formal training. These contextual differences do not function as analytic variables in this study, but provide background for understanding the range of practices described in Chapter 5.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Signature focus	Years of Experience	Representative excerpt
Brittany	Barrier-remover; turns belief into action	5–10 years	"There was like an $18 application fee… I'm paying for it because you're going to go to college."
Angela	Family independence coach; structured message cadence	5+ years	"I use 4-1-1 and 9-1-1 messages with families"—paired with direct independence coaching to caregivers.
Erica	High-challenge affirmer; builds ownership	~10 years	"They can do hard things… you don't have to give up just because life is difficult."
Dr. Whitaker	Step-wise 'feed-forward' coach; soft-skills builder	20+ years	"Let's do it together… sentence starter… paste it in the chat… copy it into your Google Doc."
Tanya	Buy-in & time-management coach	Not specified	"Once they see a path they're excited about, everything changes. They start showing up." (Her interviews repeatedly stressed time-management as a foundation.)
Lori	Culturally responsive planner; 'value' via time & money	Not specified	"This is life. This isn't a game… We can't stay on the couch forever," and "You talk money to them… their attitude changes."
Melissa	Reality-check motivator; value-framing	Not specified	"You have to help them dream but also help them find something that will sustain them."
Derrick	Dreams-to-sustainability realist	~4 years	Values virtual learning for SWD growth
Marsha	Student-led goals & life-skills scaffolding	30 years	"At the beginning of the year… I do a 60-day, 100-day, and five-year plan" (also emphasizes student-authored goals and one-on-one, real-world exposure).

Note. "Signature focus" captures each teacher's expectations and transition emphasis.

Descriptions of Participants

The following participant snapshots provide brief portraits of the nine SPED teachers who contributed to this study. These summaries offer background about each teacher's professional experience and approach to transition planning.

Brittany Ellison

Brittany earned her degree in regular education with a background in music. She worked in a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom before homeschooling her own children, some of

whom have special needs. When she returned to the workforce, she joined VLA as a SPED teacher. Her transition work centers on frequent, conversational check-ins that invite students to reflect on different career pathways, and she revisits goals set early in the school year to keep students engaged and motivated to continue working toward them. Britanny emphasizes emotional reading and often pauses transition conversations when students are in "crisis," prioritizing their well-being before returning to transition goals.

Angela Moreno

Angela Moreno has over three decades of experience in SPED across public schools, drug rehabilitation centers, correctional facilities, and state-level leadership roles. She insists that transition activities must be grounded in "real life," with personalized, practical tasks over generic worksheets or canned curriculum. Angela regularly uses tools like goal logs and reflection sheets to center student ownership, reminding them that "these aren't my goals, they're yours." She adjusts plans as students' interests evolve and focuses on helping them visualize futures that align with their abilities, needs, and community contexts.

Erica Malone

Erica Malone spent approximately 13 years in traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms before joining VLA. She has experience in both teaching and SPED compliance. She defines transition activities as tasks that prepare students for further education, employment, community engagement, and independent living when appropriate. As students approach graduation, she shifts from occasional activities to a more sustained focus on life after high school. Erica highlights the importance of trust and emotional safety as prerequisites for meaningful transition planning and often balances aspirations with "career realism," helping students pursue achievable, sustainable goals.

Dr. Carla Whitaker

Dr. Carla Whitaker joined VLA after retiring from a long career that included roles as a classroom SPED teacher, administrator, director, and higher education instructor across multiple states. She supports a caseload composed mostly of high school students and defines transition activities as structured experiences that prepare students for college, careers, and community participation. She views transition as central to students' educational trajectories rather than supplemental, emphasizing activities such as job-site visits, soft skill development, and sustained support after placement. Drawing on her multi-state background, Dr. Whitaker frequently highlights how Oklahoma's limited infrastructure, particularly the absence of job coaches and transition facilitators, shapes what schools can provide.

Tanya Wells

Tanya Wells has 14 years of experience in education, with the first 12 spent teaching middle school English language arts in brick-and-mortar settings. Although she originally earned a degree in physical education, her career has centered on literacy instruction and later SPED. She defines transition activities in practical, hands-on terms: résumé building, job applications, time management, and helping students balance school and work responsibilities. Tanya frames transition as "getting them ready for the real world," emphasizing individualized, concrete preparation. She consistently highlights time management as a foundational life skill and uses realistic conversations and structured encouragement to help students build buy-in for future planning.

Lori McKnight

Lori McKnight has over 20 years of experience in education, including roles in brick-and-mortar schools and as an assistant daycare director. Initially trained in English education,

she later earned SPED certification after working closely with SWD in general education settings. She describes transition activities as opportunities for students to explore and pursue employment or post-secondary education-related goals, and she brings confidence and ease with virtual learning into her current role. While transition work can be more complex online, Lori emphasizes discovery-oriented activities that help students broaden their understanding of life after high school. She also notes that cultural norms and generational expectations influence how families talk about the future, shaping how she frames value and motivation in transition planning.

Melissa Crane

Melissa Crane spent 18 years teaching in a rural brick-and-mortar classroom before joining VLA, where she has worked for 7 or 8 years. She notes that many of her students come from agricultural or working-class backgrounds and may not view a four-year college as realistic or desirable. Melissa frames transition planning around attainable next steps, including skilled trades, community college, and local employment opportunities. She is known for her direct, honest conversations with students, often emphasizing the urgency of planning for independence, especially for those who may not have consistent adult support.

Derrick Holt

Derrick Holt is a veteran teacher who spent more than two decades teaching mostly fifth grade in a small rural district before transitioning into virtual teaching. After joining VLA part-time, he later moved into a full-time role and completed SPED certification, noting that the additional training helped him "better serve the kids." He defines transition activities as supports that make the move from one life stage to the next "less stressful and more successful," especially for older students nearing graduation. Derrick's approach is grounded in knowledge of

students' home environments and community contexts, which informs how he calibrates expectations and plans realistic next steps. He also believes that virtual learning can be even more effective than traditional settings for SPED students, citing increased communication, flexibility, and individualized support as key advantages.

Marsha DeWitt

Marsha DeWitt is in her thirty-first year of teaching and currently works full-time in a brick-and-mortar high school while also serving part-time as a SPED teacher in VLA. With experience in physical and SPED, she initially sought virtual work for financial reasons but has remained because she values the individualized relationships it allows. Marsha views transition activities as preparation for adult life, helping students build routines and identify sustainable employment options. She emphasizes foundational life skills, such as cooking, laundry, and safely navigating the community, as must-have components of independence. She often builds long-term relationships with students that extend beyond graduation.

Researcher Role and Positionality

I served as a SPED principal at VLA during the period surrounding data collection. This role mattered for the study in several ways. First, it provided insider access and contextual knowledge about VLA's structure, transition routines, and state-level compliance expectations, which helped me interpret teacher descriptions of ILPs, IEP timelines, and virtual transition practices. Second, it introduced power dynamics and the potential for social desirability bias, because some participants knew me as part of the school's leadership. Third, my administrative experience shaped the questions I asked and the lens through which I viewed transition planning.

To reduce power dynamics and conflicts of interest, I excluded teachers under my direct supervision from the recruitment and relied on a district-provided list that was filtered

accordingly. I emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, clarified that responses would not be shared with school leadership, and reiterated that participation or non-participation would have no impact on employment. During interviews, I adopted a neutral, practice-focused stance, using open-ended prompts and follow-up questions that invited elaboration without signaling preferred answers. When participants expressed views that closely aligned with my own beliefs about transition or virtual schooling, I consciously avoided over-affirmation and instead asked them to expand or provide examples so that their words drove the conversation.

Reflexive journaling was the primary tool for managing bias and staying neutral throughout the study. I maintained a reflexive journal across the project, writing at three points in the workflow: 5–10 minutes before interviews to surface assumptions and expectations about each participant; immediately after interviews to document emotional tone, moments of rapport or discomfort, and my own reactions; and during early cycles of coding to note where my interpretations might be drifting toward prior assumptions or desired findings. These entries captured, for example, my initial nervousness as an interviewer, my effort to remain calm when a participant appeared anxious, and my awareness of times when I strongly agreed with a teacher's philosophy but intentionally shifted toward inquiry rather than affirmation.

Beyond the journal, I used several strategies to manage bias and enhance neutrality in analysis. I maintained an audit trail of coding decisions, created case-by-code and co-occurrence tables, and wrote analytic memos for each participant to ensure that no single voice drove a theme. I actively searched for disconfirming evidence before finalizing categories and triangulated interview themes with OSDE data and site-level documents where appropriate. Member checking occurred in two phases. First, participants were allowed to review their interview transcripts for accuracy and to clarify or refine any statements. Second, once the

participant snapshots were drafted, I emailed each teacher a summary of their vignette and invited them to confirm the accuracy of their portrayal or request revisions. This additional step ensured that the narrative profiles reflected their intended experiences and provided participants with an opportunity to correct any interpretive drift. No participants requested changes. Together, these practices helped bracket my administrative position and keep interpretations grounded in participants' voices rather than in institutional perspective.

Recruitment and Consent

To ensure ethical neutrality, the district-provided teacher contact list was filtered to exclude educators under the researcher's direct supervision. Using a single IRB-approved recruitment email (see Appendix D), invitations were sent to eligible SPED teachers. Interested teachers contacted the researcher to volunteer, and interviews were scheduled within the study window based on educator availability. In total, nine teachers consented and completed virtual interviews. Each participant received the informed-consent document in advance. At the start of each Zoom session, the researcher reviewed the consent script, recorded verbal consent, and subsequently emailed a signed copy to the participant. Participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. No student data were collected, and no identifying information about participants was shared with school administrators. Recruitment occurred during a period of organization-wide staffing reductions at the site; additional detail is provided in the Limitations section.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews designed to explore SPED teachers' perceptions, expectations, and communication strategies regarding postsecondary transition planning for students in a virtual charter school. Nine interviews were

conducted via Zoom, a secure video conferencing platform. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and followed an IRB-approved protocol that included open-ended questions about how teachers define and implement transition activities, communicate expectations, and navigate supports and challenges in a virtual setting. Follow-up prompts encouraged elaboration on how teacher expectations may influence student engagement and motivation. With verbal consent, all interviews were audio and video-recorded. Zoom's auto-transcription feature was used to generate initial transcripts, which were then reviewed and edited by the researcher to ensure accuracy.

Reflective notes and analytic memos were maintained throughout the data collection process to capture early impressions, document emergent codes, and monitor researcher reflexivity (Miles et al., 2014). All transcripts were de-identified, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. No student names or identifiable student data were collected. To enhance credibility, participants were invited to review their transcripts as part of a member checking process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), however, no participants responded to that invitation. All data were stored on a password-protected, encrypted device accessible only to the researcher. In compliance with IRB guidelines, data will be retained for three years following study completion and then permanently deleted. Findings will be reported in aggregate form to protect participant identities.

Document Review

Alongside interviews, I conducted a document review of publicly available reports from the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), including the FY2024 compliance matrix. These documents were used to situate the study site and provide contextual indicators relevant to secondary transition, with specific reference to Indicator 13, Secondary Transition Documented

(OSDE, 2024b). This helps contextualize the site and establish external indicators relevant to transition planning. Documents reviewed included the FY2024 compliance matrix and two statewide guidance documents governing IDEA implementation (Oklahoma Special Education Policies & Procedures, 2024; Special Education Evaluation & Eligibility Handbook, 2024). These sources were used as contextual references rather than evidence of local implementation quality. Data triangulation was employed by comparing interview themes with OSDE indicators and district-level artifacts where relevant.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol for this study was developed and refined through a pilot study involving semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016) with three SPED teachers at VLA. The pilot helped clarify question phrasing, test the interview flow, and ensure alignment with the study's theoretical framework and research questions. Initial pilot interviews revealed common themes related to teacher expectations, virtual communication barriers, and the importance of individualized planning. As a result, the final interview guide emphasized open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) regarding teachers' experiences in supporting SWD during transition planning. Questions addressed how teachers define transition activities, set and communicate postsecondary goals, and navigate barriers and supports in a virtual setting.

Throughout the data collection process, the protocol proved effective at eliciting rich, nuanced responses. While the structure provided consistency across interviews, the semi-structured design allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on topics most relevant to them. During the early phases of data collection, I noted that several of my interview questions were too long or complex. This sometimes left teachers confused by the way the conversation was

unfolding, and clarification was needed. As a result, I adapted in real-time by simplifying while keeping the core meaning intact. For example, instead of asking, “Can you walk me through the process you use to set transition-related goals, such as career readiness or independent living skills, for a specific student?” I asked Carla, “Can you walk me through the process you use to set transition-related goals?” But Lori, I paraphrased the question, asking, “How do you talk to students about their goals?” Staying consistent with qualitative research and semi-structured interviews, I adjusted the questions when needed to allow teachers to respond comfortably without compromising the integrity of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This reflective approach contributed to the overall quality and trustworthiness of the data collection process.

Several themes emerged across the nine interviews, including the influence of cultural awareness, the emotional toll of transition work, and surprising reports of increased effectiveness in virtual settings for some students. Participants responded well to the interview guide, often expanding on initial questions without prompting. These responses affirmed the protocol’s ability to surface perspectives on teacher expectations, communication strategies, and systemic barriers in SPED transition planning, in a virtual setting. The protocol was aligned with the study’s theoretical frameworks. These frameworks informed the structure and content of the questions, ensuring alignment with the research questions and supporting a data collection process that highlighted how teachers’ beliefs and strategies shape transition outcomes.

Analysis

This study used thematic analysis to explore how SPED teachers in a virtual charter school perceive, communicate, and implement expectations during post-high school transition planning. Thematic analysis offers a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying, organizing,

and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: Phase 1 (*familiarization*, Phase 2 (*generating initial codes*), Phase 3 (*searching for themes*), Phase 4 (*reviewing themes*), Phase 5 (*defining and naming themes*), and Phase 6 (*producing the report*). This approach aligns with the study's constructivist epistemology, which views knowledge as co-constructed through lived experiences and contextual interactions (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). The analysis began with a set of a priori codes developed from the study's theoretical framework; these reflected foundational concepts such as teacher expectations, value-based communication, and motivation/engagement.

Guided by the theoretical framework, I specified a priori codes drawn from Pygmalion, EVT, and HET (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). Teacher expectations denote belief statements and references to how those beliefs informed subsequent actions. For example, Angela: "I believe she could do it," offered while describing a decision to push toward higher-level coursework. Value-based communication denotes teacher talk that links transition tasks to students' future goals, interests, or careers and the engagement teachers then report. For example, Brittany: "They went to Francis Tuttle and toured it. He's serious now." Erica: "You talk money to them, and their eyes light up". Motivation/engagement is analyzed through teachers' perceptions and captures teacher-reported indicators such as persistence with tasks, responsiveness to outreach, and attendance following expectation or value messages.

Consistent with HET, I also coded three enacted practice domains: instructional decisions (maintaining rigor through authentic, meaningful tasks and flexible structures that preserve challenge), proactive feedback (clear goals/success criteria and feed-forward guidance), and equitable climate and access (supportive relationships, culturally responsive communication, and

modality flexibility that widens access to opportunities) (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). Illustrative excerpts included Melissa's framing, "Just trying to get them to understand this is… we can't stay on the couch forever. We need to do something… Be independent." and Marsha's structured horizon planning, "With every student I do a 60-day, 100-day, and five-year plan", for instructional decisions; Carla's "Every week I send text reminders, over-communicating helps get them to show up" for proactive feedback; and Melissa's observations that some students "won't speak up in person but will type in chat with sentence starters," along with "Families answer a text way faster than a meeting," for equitable climate and access.

Excerpts were included when they contained both a belief or communication act and a concrete indicator (a decision, a feedback move, a climate/access move, or a teacher-reported change in engagement). Generic statements with no action or indicator were excluded. A hybrid approach was used: a priori codes were applied first and then supplemented with inductive codes as patterns emerged (e.g., mental health and emotional readiness; family involvement; barriers/supports specific to virtual settings; cultural awareness and equity).

Evidence for each construct was elicited by protocol prompts (Appendix E): Pygmalion Expectations ("Have your expectations changed over time?"; "Can you share an example where your expectations influenced engagement?"); HET Instructional decisions ("Walk me through how you set transition goals"; "What factors influence these goals?"; "How do you address challenges to keep students engaged?"); HET Proactive feedback ("How do you communicate goals/expectations/value?"; "What indicators or feedback help you assess understanding/value?"); HET Equitable climate & access ("Differences in virtual vs. brick-and-mortar?"; "What challenges do you face, and how do you address them?"); and EVT

Value/Motivation ("What strategies help students see the importance of these tasks?"; "Example where communication affected motivation/engagement?").

All interviews and analytic memos were uploaded to Dedoose (Version 9.0.17, 2021). Consistent with Phase 2, coding proceeded as a hybrid process: I began with *a priori* codes, then added inductive codes as concepts emerged during line-by-line review. To make constructs transparent, Appendix F (Codebook) defines each code and provides a quote from the data. During analysis, I examined code co-occurrence and patterns across participants and wrote analytic memos. I also searched for disconfirming evidence before finalizing themes.

In Phases 2-3, after first-cycle coding, I collated all coded excerpts by code and by participant and created analytic displays to interrogate patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I reviewed descriptive code counts at the code and family levels to gauge prevalence; consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, these counts were used to decide what to sensitize, not to set thresholds (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I then built a case-by-code matrix to examine breadth and variation across teachers and a code co-occurrence table to surface patterned relationships among constructs, for example, value-based communication pairing with proactive feedback and motivation/engagement.

I refined candidates through two review cycles corresponding to Phase 4 (reviewing themes) and Phase 5 (defining and naming themes) of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, testing for internal coherence within a category and external distinction and fit to the dataset. Using the matrices above, I explored each teacher and the patterns across all teachers to ensure a single participant did not drive the themes. For each teacher, I wrote an analytic memo summarizing their core process, representative excerpts, boundaries, and rival explanations, and I revised the codebook where needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I also actively searched for

disconfirming evidence and documented how contradictory segments narrowed or redirected the claim. The category was named a theme only when it was coherent, distinct, supported by multiple participants and multiple instances, and advanced a research question.

Throughout the analysis, I maintained an audit log of coding decisions, edits to definitions, movement of excerpts between categories, and reasons for collapsing or splitting codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For each finalized theme, I compiled a packet containing (a) a concise analytic definition, (b) a table of quotations drawn from participants, and (c) notes linking the theme to specific interview prompts and theoretical constructs. These packets guided the selection of quotations in the Findings and ensured that the reported themes rested on evidence rather than isolated anecdotes.

In Phase 6, the finalized thematic structure consisted of five major themes and two subthemes: (1) teacher expectations and beliefs; (2) career and transition readiness; (3) communication strategies and student engagement; (4) virtual supports and barriers, including Subthemes 4a (mental health and emotional readiness) and 4b (family involvement); and (5) cultural awareness and equity. These reflected both anticipated patterns and new insights that aligned with the study's research questions.

This process provided insight into how SPED teachers' expectations and communication strategies influence transition-planning practices in virtual learning environments. Together, these activities complete Phase 6 by linking finalized themes to illustrative evidence and the study's research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reflexivity

To ensure trustworthiness and validity in this qualitative study, a range of strategies were implemented to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba &

Lincoln, 1989). Throughout the research process, the researcher remained mindful of their positionality, acknowledged potential bias, and employed reflective strategies to enhance analytical rigor. Credibility was supported through engagement with participants, active listening, and member checking. Each participant was invited to review their transcript to verify accuracy and offer clarifications or elaborations. To enhance credibility, I triangulated interview themes with OSDE data where appropriate and used a convergence table to mark confirmatory or divergent patterns. This also supports transferability by situating the site within its state-level compliance context. A limitation is that Indicator 13 reflects documentation presence rather than student engagement or implementation fidelity.

Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) throughout the study. This journal documented emotional tone, interviewer reactions, observations of participant behavior, and reflections on positionality. For instance, early entries reflected my initial nervousness and growing confidence in neutrality. In contrast, later entries revealed deeper awareness of how power dynamics, rapport, and participant discomfort (as in Interview #8) shaped the interview experience. I journaled at three points in the workflow: 5-10 minutes before the interview, to document any assumptions about each participant. Then, allowed 10 -15 minutes immediately after the interview to capture the emotional tone, and any potentially leading prompts. During each coding session, I journaled to log coding decisions. I treated the journal as its own dataset, tagging entries with planned and emerging labels, cross-checking notes against the interviews, and re-reading for examples whenever a note flagged potential bias.

The journal served as a space to unpack personal reactions, manage empathy, and remain self-aware. For example, I noted moments of emotional resonance, such as shared beliefs about

student voice or family barriers, but remained neutral by redirecting the focus to the participant's lived experience. This approach strengthens the overall trustworthiness and integrity of the study. It reflects a conscious and ongoing effort to honor participants' voices, maintain analytical rigor, and present findings that reflect the complexity of transition planning in virtual settings.

Limitations and Strengths

This study has several limitations that are important to acknowledge. Data collection and recruitment coincided with two significant workforce reductions and a leadership change at VLA. In October 2024, 144 employees were laid off, including 42 teachers. In June 2025, an additional 357 employees were laid off: 274 administrators (including the researcher) and 83 teachers. The superintendent who had approved of the study resigned shortly thereafter. These conditions plausibly increased perceived risk, reduced availability, and eroded trust among staff, suppressing response rates and complicating scheduling. To mitigate access constraints, I employed multiple outreach waves, flexible scheduling, and clear de-identification in all materials. Nevertheless, I acknowledge a likely nonresponse bias toward those with greater psychological safety or more stable roles during this period.

The research draws on the experiences of nine SPED teachers at VLA; the findings are not intended to be generalizable to all virtual or brick-and-mortar SPED environments. The goal of this qualitative study was to provide depth and insight. The study reflects the voices of a specific group of teachers working in a unique virtual context, which may limit applicability to other settings. Additionally, the researcher's insider role as a school administrator at VLA presented both an asset and a potential bias. While the researcher intentionally excluded teachers under direct supervision to reduce power dynamics and conflict of interest, some participants may still have been hesitant to speak candidly. This dynamic was addressed through careful

ethical design, including transparent consent procedures, voluntary participation, and maintaining a neutral tone during interviews.

Reflexive journaling further supported ongoing self-awareness of positionality throughout the process. The study also reflects a self-selecting participant pool. Of the SPED teachers contacted, those who responded and followed through with interviews may have had a higher level of engagement, confidence, or investment in transition planning than those who declined or did not respond. As a result, the data may not fully capture perspectives from educators who are less engaged or more overwhelmed. Another limitation is that the study is centered on teacher perspectives. While these voices offer insight into the processes and beliefs driving transition planning, the study does not include direct input from students, families, or administrators. As a result, inferences about student motivation are indirect and reflect teachers' interpretations of students' engagement and task-value signals; triangulation with student self-reports or direct observations was beyond the scope of this study. These stakeholders play important roles in postsecondary planning and may hold perspectives that complement or complicate the narratives explored by teachers here.

Despite these limitations, the study also has several notable strengths. First, the use of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews allowed participants to reflect deeply and share detailed experiences. The flexible yet focused protocol enabled teachers to express themselves authentically while still aligning with the study's theoretical frameworks. Nine interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with consent, and transcribed using Zoom's automatic transcription, followed by researcher review for accuracy.

Another strength of the study is the researcher's commitment to reflexivity. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process, enabling the

researcher to track their positionality, emotional reactions, shifts in thinking, and the interpersonal tone of each interview. This journal helped prevent bias from shaping interpretation and strengthened the study's confirmability. Initial *a priori* codes were applied across transcripts. Through iterative coding and theme development, additional emergent themes were identified. These insights broadened the study's contribution and reflect its data-driven flexibility.

Ultimately, this study fills a gap in the literature by examining the process of SPED transition planning in a virtual setting. The voices of virtual SPED teachers offer insights into how expectations, communication, and individualization shape transition planning for students who often face significant barriers. These findings are relevant as virtual education continues to expand and evolve. Chapter 5 will present the findings from this research, including a discussion of the teachers' insights and observations and the emerging themes that these interviews yielded. This includes a discussion of teacher expectations and beliefs, career and transition readiness, communication strategies and student engagement, barriers and supports in virtual transition settings, mental health and emotional awareness, and cultural awareness and equity.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Findings from nine interviews with SPED teachers at VLA illustrate that transition planning in a virtual environment is relational, emotional, and highly contextual. The themes that emerged help explain why concerns about virtual schools persist and how SPED teachers at VLA work within those constraints to support transition planning for SWD. Teachers emphasized holding high expectations while adjusting communication and supports according to students' emotional readiness, home dynamics, and cultural background. HET and the Pygmalion Effect offer a useful lens for understanding how teachers described their belief in student potential and the relational work they do to make that belief visible. Teachers described translating expectations into concrete practices, stating goals at the start of the course, texting reminders to students, scheduling check-ins, and scaffolding steps toward a credential, which they perceived as supporting student engagement. Using EVT as an analytic lens, I interpret teachers' accounts as emphasizing three recurring drivers of motivation: expectancy, value, and utility/relevance. Teachers reported using career exploration, real-life connections, and student interests to make planning feel valuable and attainable; several also noted that value sometimes had to be built for students with limited exposure to postsecondary options at home.

Within this virtual charter school, teachers linked the strength of transition planning to the expectations they hold and how they enact and communicate those expectations. In all nine interviews, teachers made this link, most commonly through relationship-building with students and families (9 of 9), reminders and check-ins (8 of 9; seven via texting), and explicitly naming goals at the outset (7 of 9). Interpreted through HET, Pygmalion and EVT, this pattern aligns with the study's research questions: expectations (RQ1), communication practices (RQ2), and

the supports and barriers that shape enactment in a virtual setting (RQ3). These are participants' perceptions rather than causal claims.

Five themes emerged from these accounts and are organized to show how they answer the research questions (see Table 3): perceived value and purpose (Themes 1–2; RQ1), communication of value and purpose (Theme 3; RQ2), and supports and challenges in the virtual context (Theme 4 with two subthemes and Theme 5; RQ3). Table 3 summarizes this mapping and, for each theme, lists key indicators and the theoretical lens, along with quotations and simple frequency notes. Codes that initially clustered around expectations, communication, motivation, and context were consolidated into these cross-cutting themes.

Table 3

Themes with Theoretical Connections

RQ	Theme	Indicators/Practices	Theory/Lens	Quotations
RQ1	Theme 1: Teacher Expectations and Beliefs	Expectation-setting mentioned (9/9). Expectations/goals stated early (7/9), Encouraging "you can" framing	HET; Pygmalion; EVT	"The expectations I make. I just—those are laid out at the beginning." —Derrick "I encourage the expectation… they don't know that I'm expecting the expectation. But they're being encouraged." —Brittany "…we can put our expectations up high… let's try this first… then you can always shoot for your goal." —Marsha
RQ1	Theme 2: Career and Transition Readiness	Career exploration (9/9) Money/budget talk (7/9) Resume/applications (6/9) CareerTech/Vo-Tech exposure (5/9) Tours/visits (4/9)	EVT; HET	"…setting up his schedule to be able to take those classes at Francis Tuttle…" —Tanya "…watching someone do something, because we've taken tours before." —Marsha "When you talk money, then all of a sudden their eyes come open." —Melissa
RQ2	Theme 3: Communication Strategies and Student Engagement	Reminders/check-ins (8/9) Texting as channel (7/9) Phone/email contact	EVT; HET	"I text the student. If the student is under 18, I text the student and the parent… you know, reminder…" —Carla "…I need you to call me now." —Angela
RQ3	Theme 4: Virtual Supports and Barriers	Virtual/online modality referenced (9/9), Connectivity/Internet barriers (2/9), Flexibility/scheduling as support (4/9)	EVT	"It's a little bit harder in the virtual…"—Carla "I was having some Internet troubles… had to restart it." —Derrick
	Subtheme 4a: Mental Health and Emotional Readiness	Mental-health terms (9/9) Use of school programs	EVT	"…mental health, lots of mental health. I see more of that…" —Melissa "Okay, Empower U is a program that we have that [helps kids] who might have anxiety [and] depression. It's like a… mental-health class." —Angela
	Subtheme 4b: Family Involvement	Parents/families engaged (9/9) Co-communication with under-18s and parents	EVT	"…as long as they're under 18… we sit down with the parent, because so much of this goes back to them." —Derrick "…on the phone or through a text or at a meeting… and it's training the parent to think outside of the box for their child." —Carla
RQ3	Theme 5: Equity and Cultural	References to values/beliefs/background/ transportation/language (9/9)	EVT	"…whatever their family values are, probably gonna lead…" —Lori "I look at the overall, the background of the kid." —Derrick

Note. Pseudonyms are used; quotations are verbatim. Counts show the number of interviews in which an indicator appeared. Lenses indicate interpretation.

Teacher Expectations and Beliefs

Across interviews, teachers framed transition planning not as a compliance task but as preparation for adult life, with high expectations signaling that the work matters. “The expectations I make… are laid out at the beginning,” noted Derrick; “We can put our expectations up high… let’s try this first, then you can always shoot for your goal,” added Marsha. Consistent with these stances, all nine interviews included expectation-setting, and seven of nine described setting goals early. Teachers enacted those expectations through concrete planning tasks, most often career exploration (9/9), budgeting/money talks (7/9), résumés/applications (6/9), scheduling Career Tech courses (5/9), and visits/tours (4/9), with the specific activities developed in Theme 2. This theme answers RQ1 by showing how teachers communicated the value and purpose of transition activities through an explicit high-expectations stance.

Using the codebook category Expectation Signals and reflexive notes, high expectation talk was coded when teachers used action-oriented, future-focused language about student capability and paired it with next steps (e.g., “lay out expectations,” “we’re going to apply,” “you can do this,” plus goal-setting/tasks). Low expectation talk was coded when teachers emphasized limits/labels or lowered trajectories (e.g., “not college-bound,” “get realistic,” or tasking that stopped at minimum skill practice). All nine interviews contained high-expectation talk; 8 of 9 also included at least one low-expectation moment.

Teachers described toggling between aspiration and realism based on perceived readiness. Tanya reflected, “I don’t think I have any that are college-bound… if we’re not going to college, what are we going to do?” Melissa observed that “a lot of these kids… aren’t college ready,” and Carla discussed helping families “get realistic expectations of where the student will

be," then redirecting to a related pathway like Career Tech or community college. When constraints surfaced, teachers used scaffolding or reframing rather than reverting to lower expectations. One teacher described meeting with a student every morning for a quick Zoom check-in because, without that prompt, he might get distracted by other in-home responsibilities. She noted that "he could do the work," but suggested that his home life required a little extra support.

Consistent with EVT, teachers perceived that participation increased when value was explicit and near-term. "When you talk money, then all of a sudden their eyes come open," said Melissa, describing how wages and budgeting framed the purpose of applications and course planning. Getting buy-in, teachers meant observable uptake, replying to messages, attending scheduled check-ins, and producing work products like applications, résumés, budgeting tasks. For minors, buy-in often also depended on caregiver participation, for example, parents returning texts or confirming appointments. Two of nine teachers reported that texting led to better/faster parent responses; overall, seven of nine teachers used text regularly for reminders and check-ins.

To make value clear, one teacher shifted a numeracy objective from counting change to planning and pricing a week of groceries, using real prices and multi-step calculations (e.g., "Johnny will learn how to budget $2,000 a month," followed by grocery-list problems). Another teacher described walking a senior through the full sequence for a tech-school goal, checking email, replying to the program, scheduling, and attending the interview, because "they won't do it if you don't help them walk through it"; completion of those steps was the clearest marker of buy-in. Brittany also noted "a disconnect" for some students who attended check-ins but hesitated to start or finish tasks until the relevance was spelled out.

Several teachers reflected on tone and calibration, wanting to communicate belief without overwhelming students. They reported adjusting pace, breaking tasks into smaller steps, and returning to value messages when interest dipped. This self-monitoring helped them keep expectations high while fitting the plan to the student's current readiness. Taken together, frequent expectation signals paired with next-step actions supported students' expectancy for success. This finding addresses RQ1 by clarifying how SPED teachers perceived and communicated the value and purpose of transition activities, and the next theme shows how those signals were translated into the concrete routines of career and transition readiness.

Career and Transition Readiness

Career and Transition Readiness denotes the set of practiced routines through which SPED teachers convert high expectations into observable preparation for adult life in a virtual charter context. As summarized in Table 3, the theme centers on practical, future-relevant tasks that increase perceived value and move planning from intention to action. The operational markers for this theme drew from the study codebook and include value framing, feed-forward next steps, persistence and routines, application and résumé literacy, workplace soft skills and habits, tours and real-world exposure, and progress logging and reflection. These indicators specify what counts as readiness practice in the findings and anchor the interpretation that follows.

Interpreted through EVT and HET, these routines raise utility value and expectancy by linking tasks to money, independence, and concrete next steps, and by modeling and co-completing work in session so students experience immediate success. In the virtual setting, belief became visible as on-screen actions: teachers shared screens to complete forms, provided sentence starters in chat, and co-edited goal sheets and résumés in shared documents, enacting a

high-challenge, high-support stance consistent with HET while advancing EVT's value and competence cues. These routines and next steps happened on screen, in the students' bedrooms, living rooms, or kitchen tables. Teachers talked about how they saw siblings walk in the background, mute their mics so they could answer a parent, and heard family life continue around them. The teachers' "being in their homes" every day made transition tasks more authentic and helped them connect high expectations to the concrete circumstances of each student's life. These operational moves are coded as feed-forward next steps and routines, and they provide the throughline for the subsections that detail how value was made visible and how steps were coached to completion.

Across cases, teachers first made the purpose of a task concrete, often by linking it to wages, bills, and independence, and then moved immediately to co-execution during the session. Career exploration appeared in 9 of 9 interviews, value framing that emphasized money or independence in 7 of 9, and in-session application or résumé work in 6 of 9, a pattern summarized in Table 3. As Erica put it, "You talk money to them, and their eyes light up," a move that preceded concrete action on the next step. During live meetings, Carla guided students through a feed-forward sequence: "Let's do it together… let me give you a sentence starter… paste it in the chat… copy it into your Google Doc." To reduce avoidance and secure completion, Brittany reported co-walking students through forms: "They hate to fill out applications… let's just walk through it together… 'Oh, that wasn't so bad.'" Interpreted through EVT, these practices raised utility value by clarifying why the task mattered and strengthened expectancy by engineering an immediate success experience; they enacted a high-challenge, high-support stance in which belief was communicated as structured opportunity and timely assistance rather than exhortation alone.

Teachers paired structured timelines with adaptive leveling to sustain momentum over time. As Marsha explained, “At the beginning of the year, with every student, I do a 60-day, 100-day, and five-year plan”. Progress was made visible in shared artifacts. Carla noted, “We keep a Google Doc log… what did you learn?… ‘If I don’t have them make a note of it, they don’t remember’”, and Angela emphasized, “We constantly go back to their goal sheets… you didn’t make your 6-month goal, what happened?”. Both practices align with the study’s codebook category Progress logging and reflection and positioned the goal sheet as a living record for recalibrating next steps. To protect motivation, teachers also matched goals to current academic skill. Brittany reported, “If reading *[level]* is 2nd–3rd grade, I encourage hands-on options or tech school”, which corresponds to the codebook category Academic-skill/goal fit. One teacher reframed a numeracy objective, which preserved relevance while increasing cognitive demand. These adjustments protect expectancy by matching the entry point to present skills, raise utility value by tying tasks to everyday decisions, and communicate high expectations as structured opportunity rather than lowered demand.

All nine teachers described using student interests through career exploration, and seven of nine paired that with explicit value framing, often money or independence, to personalize planning. As Erica explained, “You talk money to them, and their eyes light up. I tell them: ‘You know how much money game designers make?’”. Derrick echoed the balance teachers sought: “You have to help them dream but also help them find something that will sustain them”. Angela added, “They don’t even know what jobs are out there. You have to help them see beyond what they’ve seen at home”. Together, these examples show teachers expanding students’ visions while guiding them toward realistic, sustainable pathways, consistent with the value-in-practice indicators summarized in Table 3.

Teachers emphasized responsiveness over time. Carla shared, “Some kids change their career goal every semester. I adjust the IEP goals each time to stay realistic”. They also foregrounded habits that carry into employment. Lori noted, “We have to have good time management to do all the things. This starts now”, and Melissa observed, “If you do not build skills now, you will not keep a job later”. These comments frame school routines as integral to employability rather than add-ons, aligning with the codebook indicators for soft-skills instruction and progress logging.

Several teachers described transition planning that continues to build upon multiple years and requires follow-through. Brittany noted that “this is our second year with transition” for one student and described helping him refine goals as his interests evolved. She also reported supporting former students after graduation, sharing that she had helped “a few” get into community colleges or four-year programs. Derrick emphasized the importance of long-term relationships, explaining that “I have the same kids every year… you have to know the families” for transition plans to feel meaningful. Brittany demonstrated extended follow-through, enabling a student to apply on time rather than allowing momentum to stall. These accounts illustrate practices that move beyond annual compliance requirements toward long-term, coordinated planning anchored in relationship and persistence.

Teachers also used “independence talk” to move transition tasks into identity work by helping students picture adult roles and the skills required. As Angela put it, “We talk a lot about independence. I ask them: ‘What does being an adult mean to you?’”. Tanya noted the motivational shift that follows targeted exploration: “Once they see a path they are excited about, everything changes. They start showing up”. Interpreted through EVT, these moves increase utility value (financial independence, stability, and autonomy). Looking through the lens of HET,

they reflect ambitious yet attainable pacing, and the Pygmalion effect is visible in how belief becomes tangible through structure and sustained follow-through.

Although school-level records showed variation in how consistently teachers across the broader VLA staff held weekly meetings, all nine participants in this study reported meeting with their students weekly. Their accounts reflect how teachers in this sample interpreted and enacted the expectation for ongoing connection in a virtual environment. Within this shared structure, practices can diverge substantially. Several teachers described a lean approach, using weekly meetings to review, assess curriculum progress, or assign the next step, consistent with what some participants framed as the "minimum" requirement: grading work and completing a once-a-week virtual meeting. Others enacted far more intensive routines. One teacher described meeting with a student every morning for a short Zoom check-in because "without that prompt," the student would be pulled every direction, but school. She explained that "he could do the work," but needed daily structure. Brittany offered high-touch scaffolding by walking a senior through every step of his welding-program application and even calling the college "while he was sitting right next to me" so he could watch how to advocate for himself.

Teachers also lowered practical barriers: for example, Brittany paid the application fee for a student, and Marsha maintained continuous contact and, in some cases, visited students at home to keep momentum. These differences appeared to be linked to teachers' comfort with virtual tools, experience, caseload demands, and personal disposition toward relational work; for example, Brittany's ease with Zoom and rapport-building led to a more conversational, high-touch planning process. These variations illustrate that "weekly meetings" functioned differently across teachers, ranging from compliance-driven check-ins to deeply relational, adaptive, and resource-intensive support. These routines described above depended on communication cadence

in the virtual setting. The next theme examines Communication Strategies and Student Engagement, focusing on how message frequency, tone, and channels carried readiness from talk to task in an online school, consistent with the codebook categories of feed-forward next steps, and persistence routines.

Communication Strategies and Student Engagement

Communication in the virtual context, is the primary medium for enactment; teachers "do" transition work through message cadence and in-session scaffolds. Communication is not merely procedural; it is the primary medium for engagement. Teachers described a cadence of short, specific messages (e.g., text nudges with available class times), paired with live "feed-forward" guidance (screen-share, model, co-complete) so that plans became doable in the moment rather than aspirational later. Typical moves included giving a sentence starter in chat, asking students to paste a draft response, and then co-editing the product in a shared Google Doc, steps teachers said increased follow-through when hallway reminders were impossible online. These routines combine persistence with next-step coaching, turning expectations into actions students can complete in real time. Consistent with Theme 1, seven of nine teachers reported using text regularly for reminders and check-ins, citing faster responses.

Several teachers emphasized that this virtual cadence often led to more contact, not less. Marsha said, "I'm in contact with them every day… I'm either in contact with the parent, or I'm in contact with them..," explaining that if she saw no activity in the system she would text the student and parent and, if needed, "we're gonna do a Zoom and see what's going on." Others described students reaching out late at night or between shifts to ask questions or vent. These unscheduled texts and messages signaled trust and blurred the boundaries of the school day,

underscoring that the connection in the virtual model was continuous and deeply relational rather than limited to a weekly class period.

Teachers said students would not discuss goals until they felt known, so early check-ins often stayed low-stakes and relational (e.g., “random” talk during weekly meetings) before pivoting to plans. For students who were anxious or quiet, typing in chat or keeping cameras off reduced social risk and increased disclosure; Angela used brief emoji check-ins during a coping-skills course to keep in contact daily and non-threatening. These micro-interactions, light, frequent, and student-controlled, were framed as groundwork for later goal work. Teachers located most of this work inside shared artifacts. The ILP/ICAP gave them a predictable place to name the value of a step and invite families into the plan, even when contact was brief or asynchronous.

Family loops were built for speed and usability rather than formality. Teachers leaned on simple channels, such as group texts to the student and caregiver, short household checklists to document routines over 2–3 weeks, and quick triage messages when timing truly mattered, to secure the next step without waiting for a meeting. Angela used an urgency code (4-1-1 for info, 9-1-1 for “call now”) sparingly across her career; we reference it once here to illustrate triage, not as a dominant strategy. These practices made limited synchronous time “count,” especially when students were juggling work or caregiving at home.

During Zoom calls, teachers dropped links to program pages or short tour videos, scheduled a tech-center visit together on screen, and logged artifacts in a running Google Doc, so progress stayed visible between meetings. These link-and-do moves mirror the Affordances code in the codebook and helped students experience early wins. At VLA, the ILP/ICAP provided a

common structure for expectation-setting and "value talk" in an online setting, teachers described using it to narrate why a step mattered and to calibrate challenge with families present.

Teachers described frequent, low-friction micro-prompts and reassurance across text, chat, and shared documents, paired with brief live touchpoints. The combination, predictable nudges between sessions plus in-session co-completion, raised perceived utility ("this step helps me get there") and expectancy ("I can do this step now"), consistent with EVT and HET, while signaling belief (Pygmalion) through consistency and warmth. These routines increased responsiveness and individualized support, not just barriers, in the online setting. Even with clear messages and co-completion routines, teachers described supports and barriers that shaped when and how these moves could be deployed in a virtual context.

Virtual Supports and Barriers

This theme examines how the virtual format at the study site both enables and constrains secondary transition planning for students with disabilities. I synthesize what teachers described as the distinctive affordances and constraints of doing transition work online at VLA. Analytically, I read these patterns through the expectation signals, intentional practices, and how teachers communicate task value, each of which frames how supports and barriers are perceived, enacted, and felt by students in a virtual environment.

For clarity with the study's definitions, I treat a barrier as any factor that hampers effective transition planning and a support as any factor that facilitates it. In a virtual context, barriers commonly include limited face-to-face contact, irregular attendance, technology/access issues, oversized caseloads, reduced community exposure, and uneven home support; supports commonly include one-to-one video time, flexible scheduling, texting/quick-response routines, shared digital artifacts, and the use of virtual media to make careers concrete. These

operationalizations are consistent with Chapter 1 definitions and the codebook, which differentiates virtual affordances from constraints, alongside related domains such as family partnership, structural barriers/equity, and monitoring/accountability.

Across interviews, teachers named virtual-specific supports that increased access and buy-in, especially flexible communication and parent contact. For example, participants described routinized text systems, shared checklists, and frequent goal-sheet touchbacks that kept momentum between meetings, moves that raise expectancy and perceived value in EVT terms and make high expectations visible in HET terms. At the same time, they surfaced barriers intensified online: fewer in-person cues, dependence on family routines, and the difficulty of arranging hands-on experiences such as job shadows. These appeared even among teachers who had worked in both brick-and-mortar and virtual settings, noting that one-to-one attention and media-rich exploration are genuine assets of virtual settings. In several interviews, teachers described experiences that could challenge assumptions about what happens in virtual settings regarding relationship building. They described their connection with these students often enhanced teachers' awareness of students' responsibilities, obligations, and strengths outside of "school" hours. Teachers framed these moments as evidence that virtual transition planning, when built on clear expectation signals and relational contact, can offer visibility and personalized support that traditional brick-and-mortar settings may not.

Finally, both supports and barriers were entwined with broader conditions already threaded through this chapter, mental-health load, family dynamics, and local opportunity structures. Teachers reported that virtual tools helped them reach families and sustain contact, yet the same format magnified disparities when students lacked transportation, stable schedules, or at-home prompting for follow-through. Reflexive notes during analysis captured this reality:

several teachers argued that virtual transition planning can be as effective, or more effective, when expectation signals are explicit, and value is made concrete, even as structural constraints remain outside the classroom's control. The subsections that follow organize the evidence accordingly, showing how teacher moves and platform affordances function as supports, where and why barriers persist, and how belief, value, and routine intersect to shape students' transition experiences online.

One of the most reported barriers was inconsistent participation due to real-life responsibilities; at least four of the nine teachers raised this. As Angela put it, "Getting them to show up is tricky. Some already have babies, jobs, or live on their own," while Tanya added, "Some of them are still just figuring out how to make it through the week. We have to start there." and "Just getting them to come to class is a win… some of them already have jobs… some of them have babies… sometimes school is not the priority," and Carla noted that "many… are already working full time." Aligning with EVT, these comments highlight perceived cost: time away from paid work, childcare, and survival tasks raises the subjective "price" of attending transition sessions and lowers engagement, even when value is communicated. This barrier aligns with the study's code Competing responsibilities (work hours), which captures how employment and caregiving collide with planning. Teachers also described reduced daily contact as compounding the problem ("Only getting to see them once a week… you've got to make that time count."), underscoring how virtual cadence interacts with life demands.

Teachers also pointed to thin state-level options that sit upstream of any single classroom practice. Erica summarized, "Oklahoma has fewer opportunities… there's no job coaches like in other states… Here, it's all on us." We interpret this as a structural constraint; scarce interagency partners and missing job-coaching infrastructure shift the burden onto teachers. In response,

participants described belief-driven supports that try to close the gap: concrete "expectation signals" (e.g., a teacher covering a college application fee to keep momentum), persistent feed-forward guidance, and pulling every available agency lever (e.g., Voc Rehab) to widen pathways. These actions enact high expectations despite systemic limits, consistent with the study's theoretical framework, by turning belief into visible help.

At the same time, teachers leveraged affordances unique to the virtual model that reduced cost and increased value for students and families. Faster caregiver response was a recurring win, "They'll answer a text way faster than they'll come to a meeting," and "We can get in touch with families more easily now." Individualized pacing and one-to-one time also stood out: "Online has actually worked better… they get more support and stay more focused," and when daily contact is limited, teachers "make that time count" with targeted one-on-ones. Media-based exploration made careers concrete: "They love YouTube… job searches… and Votech, we've taken tours before," which teachers coupled with quick Zoom check-ins to keep steps moving. Example: a teacher texts a parent to confirm availability, opens a short YouTube "day-in-the-life" video during a one-on-one, drops a virtual Votech tour link in chat, and co-creates a next step (complete an interest survey or draft an email). These practices map directly to the Affordances code and illustrate how virtual tools can shrink effort, raise perceived utility, and speed decisions in transition planning.

Virtual learning introduced real constraints, tech access and community ties, but also clear advantages: flexible timelines, personalized communication, and faster family reach. Leveraging those affordances to meet both individual and structural needs aligns with HET and the Pygmalion Effect. Still, across interviews one condition surfaced beneath missed log-ins and spotty Wi-Fi, students' mental health. Without emotional stability, no transition plan, virtual or

otherwise, takes root. With that foundation noted, Sub-theme 4a turns to the first practical gatekeeper of any plan: attendance under competing responsibilities, where work hours and caregiving raise the perceived cost of engagement and force real-time recalibration.

Mental Health and Emotional Readiness

Mental health surfaced across all interviews (9/9), and teachers consistently placed it ahead of academic or planning tasks. As Lori put it, "Sometimes we have to focus on stabilizing their emotions before we even talk about goals," establishing emotional regulation as a precondition for EVT expectancy: until students feel steady, they cannot view transition tasks as doable or worth the cost. The virtual format sometimes helped disclosure, "Online, they'll type it or talk in the chat; it's safer for them," one teacher noted, yet it also required more frequent, shorter check-ins to keep trust warm. Teachers paired this with Coping skills & supports (e.g., Empower U/SEL check-ins) and micro-scaffolds that rebuild expectancy: a daily emoji mood check, chunked steps, and low-stakes conversations. Example: begin with a 30-second emoji check-in, co-create a two-step task, then acknowledge completion, predictable success experiences that lower perceived cost, and nudge momentum. Together, these practices embody Pygmalion and HET balance of high challenge with strong support, stabilizing students first so that belief and structure can lift expectations.

While emotional regulation was noted earlier as a barrier to transition planning, teachers made it clear that mental health deserved a section of its own. This theme arose in all nine interviews. Teachers described how persistent anxiety, depression, trauma, or low self-worth often prevented students from valuing future goals. In many cases, emotional stabilization had to precede academic or planning conversations entirely. This section highlights how SPED teachers

at VLA approach their students' emotional lives with empathy, intentionality, and persistence. Their work reflects core elements of EVT, HET, and the Pygmalion Effect.

Although Melissa and Angela emphasized that students' emotional needs often eclipse academic concerns, other participants elaborated on how deeply this emotional readiness shaped their approach to transition planning. Brittany, for example, described how she revisits transition goals consistently "not to push, but so they know I believe they're worth planning for." This repetition serves as a quiet but persistent vote of confidence, which is key to building the self-belief needed to plan for the future. Marsha spoke about laying emotional groundwork by simply listening: "I spend the first several meetings just letting them talk. They need to know you care before they'll listen to anything about jobs or skills." Her focus on relationship-building supports both HET and the Pygmalion Effect, where teachers' beliefs and care become a catalyst for student growth.

SPED teachers noted that emotional support often had to be more deliberate and adaptive. Angela shared, "The virtual model actually lets some students open up more. They're not in front of a crowd, so I get more honesty. But it also means I have to be present in a different way, more calls, more check-ins, more reassurance." Brittany explained, "We're in their homes every day. Sometimes we're the only adults telling them they're capable." These observations align with EVT, where students see goals as meaningful and believe they can achieve them. A teacher-student relationship built on consistent communication becomes a mechanism for fostering this belief. Derrick captured the urgency of emotional triage when he said, "You can't talk about jobs and college when their world is on fire. Mental health has to come first." He and others noted that academic conversations were often delayed until students reached a point of relative emotional safety. For some, this required weeks of check-ins or conversations with no academic

agenda. Marsha added, “You have to know what they can do, and then push them just a little further. But if they’re not in a good place mentally, they’re not going to respond.” Her approach reflects differentiated support rooted in belief, aligning with both HET and the Pygmalion Effect.

Teachers also discussed strategies to scaffold emotional readiness. One approach was breaking down future planning into smaller steps to prevent a student from becoming overwhelmed. “You’ve got to break it down into steps. Otherwise, it’s too overwhelming,” Angela said. Informal conversations, stories, and real-life problem solving were often used to introduce transition concepts gradually. This approach avoided cognitive overload, allowing students time to internalize expectations without triggering avoidance or shutdown behaviors. As Angela put it, “They have to understand how the world works, nobody cares if you have an IEP after graduation. You’ve got to be ready. And we have to help them believe they can be.” Carla summarized the dual role of SPED teachers in a virtual setting by saying, “We’re not just planning transitions. We’re anchoring them emotionally so they can picture themselves in a future. Without that anchor, everything else just feels like a checklist.” Her insight reflects the unspoken emotional contract between teacher and student. When a relationship is rooted in belief, support, and emotional responsiveness, students begin to imagine new futures.

Mental health and emotional readiness were not isolated issues but foundational conditions for meaningful transition planning in virtual settings based on the teacher interviews. Teachers described how trauma, instability, and low self-worth could prevent students from even considering future goals until trust and emotional stability were established. These findings reinforce that emotional support is not supplemental, but is structural. As SPED teachers worked to anchor students emotionally, they also had to navigate the broader home environment. In

many cases, the effectiveness of transition planning was shaped by the level of support that was present in the students' homes.

Across interviews, mental health emerged as the precondition for transition work. In the virtual setting, the screen sometimes lowered social threat and invited disclosure, but stability still had to be built deliberately. Teachers relied on micro-scaffolds to create predictable success experiences that rebuild expectancy and make value feel attainable. These routines paired warmth and consistency with calibrated challenge, aligning with the study's lenses: belief signals from adults and high expectations coupled with support. With that foundation in place, the chapter turns to the relational context most likely to sustain those gains.

As teachers worked to deal with students' emotions, they discovered that the gains or setbacks often hinged on what awaited them beyond the screen. Family interactions could either reinforce or unravel every crafted plan. In EVT, caregivers helped set the daily calculus, lowering perceived cost and raising utility through reminders, logistics, and encouragement, or elevating cost when schedules, caregiving duties, or skepticism made engagement harder. This sub-theme examines when virtual tools accelerated caregiver reach and clarified roles, and when uneven home bandwidth or role ambiguity undercut follow-through. In short, we trace how family partnership became the hinge between emotional stabilization and sustained progress on transition goals.

Family Involvement

Family involvement emerged as both a support and a barrier in the transition planning process, depending heavily on each student's home environment. SPED teachers described families as either reinforcing or undermining a student's ability to follow through with postsecondary goals. These dynamics played out in the virtual context, where teacher access to

families was both enhanced and complicated. Angela described this by sharing, “Some of my students have help at home. Some of them are basically living alone and just trying to survive.” Her observation shows how home structures affected student readiness and follow–through. Melissa supports the idea of unreachable and inconsistent family support by saying, “Some of my kids don’t have any help. They’re literally doing everything on their own, and when I try to get a parent involved, it’s either a dead end or a new phone number.” Four teachers noted that students with involved families were more likely to complete tasks, respond to follow-ups, and express confidence about their future.

By contrast, students facing instability at home often lacked the logistical scaffolding necessary for long-term planning. Yet, the virtual model did create unexpected opportunities for family engagement. As Melissa observed, “I get more parent responses now than I ever did in brick-and-mortar. They’ll answer a text way faster than they’ll come to a meeting.” She states, “reminding them… I text the student. If the student is under 18, I text the student and the parent … ‘Now don’t miss your class,’ and sometimes that helps.” Virtual tools helped overcome barriers like work conflicts or transportation gaps, which previously prevented caregivers from participating in school-based planning. Brittany said the importance of leveraging this access by using the “small window to get parents on board, and when we do, it makes a big difference.” Carla added, “The parent-teacher-student triangle applies more in transition than academics,” stressing that the successful planning depends on strong collaboration across all three stakeholders. Teachers described this triangle not as a metaphor but as the engine of progress. Several recalled meetings in which a student was on camera and a parent was on speakerphone or nearby, offering clarification on schedules, transportation, or home responsibilities. In those moments, teachers adjusted timelines or rewrote the next step. They would have to shift a plan

from ‘apply this week’ to ‘email first,’ or pause to confirm whether a parent could provide a ride to Career Tech. At times, the teacher rescheduled entirely because “life happened” (babies crying, work calls, caretaking duties) made it clear that the next step needed to be simplified or sequenced differently. These real-time pivots illustrated how virtual access made interdependence visible and enabled teachers to tailor expectations to students' and parents' lived conditions.

Family involvement was rarely straightforward. Three teachers described the emotional labor involved in supporting both students and their families. Erica stated, “A lot of our parents are just overwhelmed. You want to help, but you also don’t want to overstep.” This tension between support and boundaries came up repeatedly, as teachers expressed empathy for families while acknowledging their own limits. Marsha said, “Sometimes I feel like I’m the only one holding the line for the student. The parents checked out, and the kids are in survival mode.” Teachers also spoke about the time when they had to educate families about what transition planning even was. Derrick stated, “Most parents don’t know what IDEA says about transition. They think we’re just helping them graduate.” And Erica said, “Sometimes I have to teach the parents what transition even is. They think it’s just about walking across the stage.” To bridge these gaps, teachers adapted their communication strategies, simplified information, and often provided coaching to both students and caregivers. These adaptations reflect a belief-driven approach to partnership, high expectations for students paired with patience toward their families.

Family involvement was not a binary variable but a constant presence in the background of each student’s planning. Brittany states, “I have parents who care but don’t know how to help. And then I have kids whose parents think school is the teacher’s job entirely. You get both

extremes." The virtual environment enhanced access and visibility, providing teachers with more insight into home dynamics while also expanding their relational responsibilities. These findings reinforce the core of HET, offer emotional grounding, and create a climate where success feels possible. For the SPED teachers in this study, transition planning was not just an academic task; it was a relational process shaped by the entire ecosystem surrounding the student. These teachers didn't just teach students; they also coached, reassured, and educated their families. If family sets the logistical boundaries of a student's plan, culture sets its horizon, shaping which futures feel imaginable and which remain out of sight.

Cultural Awareness and Equity

Although not prompted in the original interview guide, cultural awareness and equity emerged as a theme in the data collection. These subgroup patterns mattered for interpretation: participants consistently situated expectation-setting within students' cultural backgrounds, family contexts, and prior access to opportunities, factors that shaped how expectations were communicated and received in the virtual environment. All nine interviews included at least brief references to family values, community norms, or background; in four interviews, this surfaced unprompted and in depth. One of the most compelling insights came from Lori, who explained, "It's not that they don't want to succeed. It's just not part of their culture to talk about the future like that." Marsha stated, "In some families, they don't really talk about college or future goals. They're just focused on the now." These quotes illustrate how deeply ingrained familial and cultural beliefs can shape conversations about postsecondary planning.

In some communities, discussing long-term goals may not be a normalized or encouraged behavior. Tanya stated, "It's not always that they don't care. It's that planning for the future isn't something that's modeled or talked about at home." Rather than viewing this as student

disinterest, Lori recognized the need for cultural sensitivity and patience, choosing to scaffold expectations in a way that felt respectful and supportive when she said, “You have to start small. If you come at them with a five-year plan, they shut down. But if you say, ‘Let’s talk about next month,’ they’ll actually engage.” This ties in with references of meeting students where they are at rather than pushing future planning on learners who are struggling to make it through the very real challenges in front of them. The statement captures the crossroads of cultural norms and emotional readiness.

Cultural relevance also influenced how teachers engaged students during planning. Consider Erica’s recollection mentioned above that students’ “eyes light up” at the mention of money. Erica leveraged her attunement to their interest in these occurrences, intentionally drawing on culturally resonant careers and language to make postsecondary planning more appealing. This aligns with EVT, which suggests that students are more likely to engage in goals they see as valuable and attainable within their personal and cultural framework. Equity, in this context, was not just about access to services but about adaptive communication and relational trust. Teachers who practiced cultural humility, modifying their language, examples, and expectations, saw stronger student engagement. As Angela put it, “If you don’t take the time to understand where they’re coming from, they’re going to shut down.” Her reflection highlights the Pygmalion Effect, where students rise when teachers believe in their potential and respond with intentional support. Teachers noted these insights often emerged because of the virtual environment, which placed them in the students’ homes, where they could see and hear the values and pressures that shaped future talk. That proximity made it harder to treat culture as an abstract variable and easier to tailor expectations to what felt right for each family.

Ultimately, culturally responsive transition planning required more than checklists or compliance. It needs empathy, contextual awareness, and a willingness to adapt. Teachers who acknowledged the influence of culture, trauma, and community expectations were able to build bridges between students' lived realities and their possible futures. In doing so, they upheld high expectations and expanded the definition of what readiness and success could look like in a virtual SPED environment.

Summary

This chapter presents findings from interviews with nine SPED teachers in a virtual charter school, organized around three research questions: (1) teacher expectations for SWD in transition planning, (2) communication strategies that support engagement in postsecondary goal setting, and (3) barriers and supports that shape transition processes online. Thematic analysis yielded five interrelated themes.

Across themes, teachers emphasized that belief, value framing, and relational trust, articulated through EVT, HET, and the Pygmalion Effect, are decisive in a virtual context. Theme 1 shows how consistent "expectation signals" set a high-challenge, high-support tone. Theme 2 traces how educators scaffold career exploration and create concrete steps toward post-secondary goals. Theme 3 details cadenced texts, one-to-one check-ins, and shared checklists that make expectations visible and maintain momentum between less frequent meetings. Theme 4 synthesizes the online conditions that hinder and help: 4a surfaces how work hours and caregiving elevate the perceived cost of engagement and depress attendance, while flexible scheduling and targeted touchpoints counteract those pressures; 4b demonstrates how caregiver actions can either stabilize or unravel plans, with virtual tools often improving reach but uneven home bandwidth sometimes limiting follow-through. Finally, Theme 5 synthesizes Equity &

Cultural considerations, how family values, community norms, and opportunity structures shape how expectations are communicated and received.

The findings show that effective transition planning in a virtual school is as much about connection, belief, and adaptiveness as it is about procedural compliance. Issues of equity and access thread through each theme rather than stand alone, shaping attendance, family partnership, and opportunity structures. These themes challenge common stereotypes that virtual models weaken relationships. Teachers described being "in [students'] homes every day," often serving as the only adults telling them they were capable. They emphasized that progress depended on a teacher-parent-student triangle made more visible through virtual tools. Chapter 6 examines the implications for students and teachers and outlines policy and practice recommendations.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter interprets the study's findings in relation to the research questions and guiding frameworks, connects those interpretations to prior research reviewed in Chapter 2, and identifies implications for policy and practice. The purpose of the study was to explore how SPED teachers in a virtual charter school perceive, communicate, and navigate post-high school transition activities, with attention to the EVT, HET, and the Pygmalion effect. Three questions guided the inquiry: (1) How do SPED teachers perceive the value and purpose of transition activities? (2) How do they communicate that value and purpose to students? and (3) What supports and challenges do they report in the virtual context?

Across nine interviews, five themes emerged, aligned with the study's research questions and analytic framework. SPED teachers consistently described (a) expectation signals enacted through concrete, barrier-removing actions; (b) career and transition readiness routines that move students from goal talk to goal action; (c) communication strategies that translate expectations into cadenced reminders and feed-forward next steps (d) virtual supports and barriers that shape students' capacity to engage; and (e) cultural and equity considerations that influence how expectations are communicated and received in the virtual setting. These themes were formalized in the analytic codebook and applied across transcripts. The patterns illustrate a throughline: when teachers intentionally signal high expectations and frame value in ways that feel immediate and attainable, students engage more consistently with transition tasks.

Teachers framed transition activities as results-oriented preparation for work, education, and independent living, not as compliance paperwork. Several participants emphasized independence and employability as the core purpose, with attention to functional academics, soft

skills, and early, repeated exposure to post-school options. For example, Marsha highlighted life skills as foundational to dignity and independence for students with higher support needs. Participants also stressed “right-sized rigor”, matching goals to academic baselines to protect motivation while still stretching students. Brittany described steering students with 2nd–3rd grade reading level toward hands-on or technology-center pathways first, while keeping academic avenues visible if motivation and support rise. This illustrates an asset-oriented view that resists both “watered-down” activity lists and “one-size fits all” pathways. These pathways mirror what research identifies as “high-quality” transition planning, things like individualized goals, scaffolded rigor, and alignment with students’ strengths and preferences (Haber et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Powers et al., 2005).

Some teachers reported value in the virtual setting for transition planning, greater individualization, flexible contact with families, and faster communication loops, countering the common assumption that virtual necessarily weakens transition services. Derrick articulated that virtual contact can be more effective for certain SWD when teacher expectations are explicit and routines are consistent, a reflection also captured in the reflexive memos. In EVT terms, teachers framed transition tasks with high utility value, raising perceived relevance. In Pygmalion/HET terms, they treated expectations as actions rather than beliefs alone, converting “you can” into “we will, here’s how”. This aligns with studies demonstrating that expectation signals become powerful when paired with concrete teacher actions, such as barrier removal and consistent follow-through (Brophy & Good, 1970; Rubie-Davies, 2015; Rubie-Davies et al., 2015).

Two communication moves were powerful: 1) Feed-forward next-step scaffolds. Teachers routinely modeled and co-completed high-friction tasks, then handing off the next step. Carla described “do-it-now” scripting that makes progress tangible. Brittany narrated

co-navigating a tech-school application, email follow-ups, and interview scheduling; when a fee blocked submission, she paid it on the spot to convert intent into action, an expectation signal that the student belonged in that pathway. Research has emphasized that actions like this are associated with stronger postsecondary outcomes (Haber et al., 2016; Rowe et al., 2021). 2) Value framing in the student's language. Teachers discussed money, independence, and family roles to make the 'why' concrete. Melissa reported that pairing wages with everyday purchases flips a switch for some students; she also framed driver's licenses as a family responsibility and safety issue, which elevated the perceived stakes of licensing steps.

These messages were relentlessly routine-based: quick texts, brief end-of-session check-ins, and simple progress artifacts. Angela described 4-1-1/9-1-1 texting with families to triage urgency and keep momentum between weekly meetings. Teachers also used interest-based mapping, literally pulling up a map, naming nearby businesses, and imagining tasks together, to bridge from abstract goals to place-based action. These routines operationalize raising utility value, while giving the practice architecture, such as frequent feedback loops. The application-fee example could be translated into barrier removal, a concrete "you are college material" message.

Teachers leveraged one-on-one time to individualize, asynchronous tools to widen exposure, and rapid family texting to accelerate follow-through. Several also described interagency links and mental-health coursework as catalytic supports when introduced earlier in school. Angela recounted a senior whose Empower U coping strategies stabilized school and employment; the course became an IEP-aligned transition support. Practices like this echo documented predictors of successful transition outcomes that emerged in Chapter 2 as contributors to postschool success (Papay, 2019; Powers et al., 2005; Trainor et al., 2020).

The most persistent challenge was less daily contact, which puts a premium on making limited time count. Teachers also named transportation and licensing, competing work hours, and uneven family involvement as recurrent barriers; these often determine whether a student can act on a goal regardless of motivation. Melissa and Erica both noted that when home supports are thin, teachers must double down on feed-forward scaffolds and realistic, step-sized goals to prevent discouragement.

Mental-health load was a throughline. Teachers frequently paused academics to deal with emotional readiness and then sequenced transition work accordingly. In the reflexive journal, I noted adapting interview pacing and neutrality in response to participant discomfort, a move that mirrors teachers' adaptive stance with students. This focus on stabilizing emotional readiness aligns with research indicating that mental health regulation is often a prerequisite for engagement in transition planning and adaptation to postschool environments (Petretto et al., 2021; Trainor & Romano, 2023).

A final pattern, reflected in Theme (e), centered on cultural awareness and equity. Teachers framed expectation-setting and transition talk within students' family values, community norms, and access to opportunity, describing how those contexts shaped what futures felt imaginable. In Chapter 2, I noted that effective transition planning requires culturally competent practices that engage families as partners while navigating conflicting terminology, limited shared planning time, and role confusion among team members (Blanchett, 2001; Allam & Martin, 2021). The teachers in this study encountered the same dynamics in virtual settings: they adjusted their language to match families' understandings, negotiated when and how parents could join meetings, and clarified who was responsible for concrete next steps. Rather than lowering expectations when family priorities or cultural norms differed from school-focused

trajectories, participants described pacing conversations, using familiar examples, and identifying "right-sized" goals that honored family roles while keeping post-school options visible. In this sense, cultural responsiveness functioned as a vehicle for maintaining high expectations, not a rationale for softening them.

Virtual schooling does not eliminate structural barriers; it simply shifts the work. Teachers who anticipate barriers and build them into goals translate high expectations into executable pathways. The combination of EVT's value-framing, HET's proactive routines, and Pygmalion's belief-in-action consistently surfaced in these adaptations.

Expectancy operated as signals embedded in actions, such as paying a fee, attending a site visit, or calling a program alongside a student. These moves conveyed, "I expect you to be here, and I am investing accordingly," which students often mirrored in effort and persistence. Participants exhibited HET's hallmarks: (a) high-challenge tasks with scaffolds, (b) warm socio-emotional climate, and (c) explicit goal-setting and feedback routines. Teachers elevated utility value by consistently linking tasks to money, independence, and family roles; they amplified expectancy via co-completion and micro-successes, which built self-efficacy for the next step. Their actions reflected the expectancy and value processes identified in prior motivation research, demonstrating how virtual SPED teachers operationalized core mechanisms of EVT to increase persistence on transition tasks (Cooper et al., 2017; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Zimmerman, 2017). These findings align with and extend the study's theoretical grounding in Chapter 3.

The findings reinforce and extend the literature synthesized in Chapter 2: expectations shape motivation and opportunities; sustained low expectations depress outcomes; and virtual settings intensify the need for explicit signals because everyday in-person cues are sparse. The

study adds qualitative texture to the enactment of expectation signals and value-framing online. It also foregrounds mental-health readiness and interagency coordination as transition supports, an emphasis consistent with evidence on predictors of post-school success and with the IDEA mandate for results-oriented planning.

The practices described by participants mirror what high-quality transition planning has identified in the literature, including Indicator 13 compliance elements and evidence-based predictors of postschool success. Teachers like Brittany, Derrick, and others demonstrated follow-through over the years, individualized planning, and creative problem-solving to address barriers. These behaviors reflect not only the spirit of IDEA's results-oriented mandate but also the empirically established components of effective transition programs reviewed in Chapter 2. Their enactment of these practices in a virtual context extends the literature by showing how high-quality transition planning can be delivered when physical proximity is limited but relational access and expectation signals are strong (Brophy & Good, 1970; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Fong & Kremer, 2020; Petretto et al., 2021; Rubie-Davies, 2015; Tonks et al., 2021).

Not all teachers enacted these practices with the same intensity. Within this sample, some participants described doing the minimum required weekly check-ins. In contrast, others reported driving to students' homes for in-person visits, arranging and attending Career Tech or college tours, or paying application fees when cost became a barrier. Interpreted through HET, these differences reflect more than personality alone; they point to variation in teachers' sense of efficacy and in how strongly they see themselves as agents who can shape outcomes rather than comply with procedures (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). Chapter 2 highlighted that high-expectation teachers tend to pair ambitious goals with flexible grouping, warm climates, and persistent feedback, even under structural constraints (Rubie-Davies, 2006; Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). In

this study, those who "went above and beyond" described more substantial confidence in their transition skills, more comfort with virtual tools, and a willingness to absorb additional time and cost, suggesting that experience, targeted training, and manageable caseloads may enable teachers to translate belief into extra-mile actions (Hashey & Stahl, 2014; Molnar et al., 2021; Wandry et al., 2008). From an EVT perspective, these teachers also appeared to assign high value to transition work itself and to their own capacity to make a difference, which helps explain why they persisted with barrier-removing efforts even when those efforts extended beyond formal role expectations (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

As a former SPED administrator, my professional background inevitably shaped how I interpreted participants' accounts and recognized the nuances of their work. Years of supervising SPED teachers, leading IEP meetings, and troubleshooting transition barriers with families deepened my awareness of the invisible labor behind seemingly simple teacher actions. This vantage point sensitized me to structural pressures that often sit beneath teachers' descriptions of "just doing my job." It also allowed me to see variations in practice through a leadership lens: the teachers who went above and beyond mirrored patterns I have observed in the field, where confidence with transition processes, comfort with virtual tools, and a strong belief in students' potential drive more proactive, equity-focused practice. At the same time, this prior experience required ongoing reflexivity so that I did not over-privilege administrative interpretations or assume shared norms across teachers' contexts. The reflexive memos throughout data collection and analysis helped me bracket those assumptions and remain grounded in teachers' own meaning-making while acknowledging how my leadership background informed both my attention to detail and my sensitivity to systemic constraints.

Summary

The central insight of this study is that expectations travel through routines. In a virtual school, where hallway cues and daily proximity are thin, teachers' high expectations must appear as visible, routinized actions that raise task value, remove barriers, and make progress unavoidable. The most effective communicators combined belief, structure, warmth, and immediacy; you can, we will, here's the next click. When those signals were present, students engaged more consistently in the work of becoming ready for life after high school. These findings confirm and extend transition-planning literature by demonstrating that high-quality, expectation-forward practices can be enacted in virtual schools when teachers leverage routines, relationships, and barrier-removing actions aligned with established predictors of postschool success.

Conclusion

This basic qualitative study examined how SPED teachers in a full-time virtual charter school perceive, communicate, and enact expectations during post-high school transition planning. Guided by the Pygmalion Effect, HET, and EVT, the study addressed three questions: (1) How do teachers understand the value and purpose of transition activities? (2) How do they communicate that value and those expectations to students? and (3) What supports and challenges shape transition work in virtual settings? The design centered on semi-structured Zoom interviews with nine SPED teachers, analyzed thematically and interpreted through the study's theoretical lenses. The goal was to move beyond compliance to illuminate the belief-and-communication moves that support meaningful post-school outcomes in virtual contexts.

Across interviews, teachers described transition planning as intensely relational, pragmatic, and paced by students' readiness. Three cross-cutting patterns summarize what they reported doing when transition services worked well. First, belief traveled as action. Teachers' high expectations were not only stated but enacted in barrier-removal moves, phoning tech centers with students on the call, paying small application fees, and co-completing authentic steps in real time. These "belief-into-action" signals were consistently connected to student follow-through. For example, one teacher described calling programs and walking a student step-by-step through enrollment; another paid the application fee so a student could submit on time. In each case, the expectation was not motivational talk but a concrete next step taken together.

Second, communication was short, frequent, and usable. Teachers in the virtual context emphasized micro-routines that made progress unavoidable: text-first communication, "one-screen" messages with a single, immediate action, and brief, feed-forward check-outs at the end of sessions. Some formalized urgency codes with families to triage responses and keep momentum. These practices surfaced in the data as Communication Strategies and Monitoring & Accountability and were repeatedly linked to greater consistency in completing transition tasks.

Third, teachers treated structural and socio-emotional barriers as part of the plan, not afterthoughts. In virtual schools, limited daily face-time and reliance on families can compound obstacles such as licensing/transportation, work schedules, and uneven reading levels. Teachers described naming these prerequisites directly, embedding soft-skills instruction, and, when indicated, integrating mental-health supports as transition services to stabilize students before or alongside career steps. The same teachers leveraged virtual affordances while arranging in-person visits or site tours when feasible. These patterns appeared under Structural Barriers &

Equity, Transition Task Mastery, Mental Health & Emotional Readiness, and Community Exposure & Services.

Together, the findings portray transition services in virtual settings as a cadence of high-expectation signals, short usable communications, and proactive handling of prerequisites. Teachers consistently framed value in the concrete terms that students recognized: money, independence, and safety, while keeping families in the loop with fast channels and simple checklists.

Virtual programs must design systems that make belief visible, streamline communication, and address structural barriers so teachers are not relying on individual improvisation. The findings suggest that virtual schools should embed predictable routines, create communication channels for families, and integrate readiness prerequisites into transition plans rather than leaving these to teacher discretion. These field-level moves translate the individual practices identified in this study into sustainable program structures.

Theoretical Integration

These patterns show what teachers did and how their actions reflect underlying expectation processes described in the study's theoretical framework. Teachers' internal beliefs became visible in how they structured sessions. These high-expectation signals aligned with students taking on harder, more authentic tasks over time. HET clarifies the actionable side of belief. Teachers set a challenging-but-doable bar and paired it with support. The "do-it-now" cadence turned abstract encouragement into scaffolded performance. Teachers raised task value by tying steps to money, independence, and immediate utility. Short, concrete, and relevant messages increased students' expectancy and value, especially when packaged with authentic artifacts created during sessions and logged in a running portfolio.

The findings indicate a need for targeted professional development on expectation-setting in virtual contexts. Teachers repeatedly described learning these practices informally and adapting them through trial and error. Training that illustrates how to convert belief into visible, scaffolded routines would help standardize high-expectation practices across virtual SPED programs. Such PD is especially needed because virtual environments amplify the consequences of unclear expectations.

This study contributes a practical, theory-aligned profile of effective transition work in virtual SPED contexts: (a) institutionalize feed-forward micro-routines at the end of each session; (b) standardize short, usable communication loops with families; (c) make structural prerequisites explicit fields in transition plans and track them like benchmarks; (d) require authentic artifacts and soft-skills instruction as standing transition services; (e) integrate mental-health readiness where coping skills are a prerequisite to progress; (f) systematize early DRS/VR engagement; (g) provide professional learning on expectation signals; and (h) leverage virtual affordances for exposure while scheduling targeted in-person visits. These system-level moves, elaborated in Chapter 6, could operationalize the study's findings into routines that schools can measure.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations bound interpretation. First, the study reflects a single virtual charter school and a sample of nine teachers; findings are transferable rather than generalizable. Second, data are self-reported interviews without observations or direct student/family perspectives; this limits triangulation of what teachers described against what students experienced. Third, the researcher's insider role may have introduced subtle power dynamics or positivity bias, despite steps to protect confidentiality, member-checking, and reflexive journaling throughout data

collection and analysis. Finally, the study did not track post-school outcomes; claims concern processes and perceived effects rather than causal impact on employment, education, or independent living.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on these findings, future work should (1) expand to multiple virtual schools and varied geographies to strengthen transferability; (2) incorporate student and family voices, along with observations of transition sessions and artifacts, to triangulate expectation signals and communication routines; (3) test professional development that targets feed-forward routines, "one-screen" messaging, and value-framing scripts, using mixed-methods designs to examine change in teacher practice and student follow-through; (4) track structural prerequisites and authentic artifacts as measurable indicators within transition plans, relating them to interim outcomes; (5) study integrated mental-health supports as transition services, including timing and effects on engagement; (6) evaluate structured DRS/VR touchpoints initiated at or before first high-school IEPs; and (7) examine equity by disability label, reading level, race/ethnicity, and rurality to detect whether expectation signals and communication routines mitigate opportunity gaps in virtual settings.

Future research should also examine how teacher characteristics influence expectation-setting practices and the likelihood of "above-and-beyond" actions, given the variation observed in this study. The present study suggests that these factors may shape teachers' belief-in-action tendencies, yet a systematic investigation is needed to understand how they interact with student outcomes. Additionally, research that centers on intersectionality would address gaps noted in transition literature.

Policy/Practice Implications

Grounded in the data and aligned with Chapter 6's role in the dissertation structure, the implications translate into concrete, system-level moves for virtual schools. First, institutionalize "feed-forward" micro-routines by requiring a 5–10 minute end-of-session transition block in which one next step is identified, scheduled, and then logged in a shared artifact; this formalizes the high-expectation, do-it-now cadence teachers described. Second, adopt a three-way communication loop with urgency codes by standardizing quick, usable channels, allowing teacher-family "4-1-1/9-1-1" conventions to triage issues, and providing short PD on writing "one-screen" messages that frame utility and name one immediate action. Third, make structural barriers part of the plan; by adding a required "Readiness Prerequisites" field to transition plans and tracking these like IEP benchmarks so transportation/licensing do not silently veto goals. Fourth, embed artifacts and soft-skills instruction by replacing simulated tasks with authentic submissions co-completed during sessions and archived in a portable transition portfolio; aligned with HET by pairing high-challenge tasks with scaffolded scripts. Fifth, integrate mental-health readiness into transition services by establishing screeners and referral pathways, and allowing them to satisfy transition services when coping skills are a prerequisite to job or college steps, with invitations beginning as early as grades 8–10 to front-load stabilization. Sixth, systematize interagency coordination early by establishing a standing DRS/VR touchpoint by the first high-school IEP, providing families with simplified checklists and direct assistance with form completion, and tracking outreach as a service. Seventh, invest in professional learning on expectation signals that trains teachers to convert belief into action through barrier-removal moves, money/independence framing scripts, and place-based mapping with students, paired with coaching on equity-focused expectancy awareness so "right-sizing" does not become

"lowering." Finally, leverage virtual affordances for exposure by curating short, high-value video tours and virtual job shadows and scheduling occasional in-person site visits when feasible; treat exposure as a standing service category for students with limited networks.

Summary of the Study

In a virtual charter school, transition planning advances when belief is made visible in small, repeatable actions; when communication is brief, specific, and tied to one immediate step; and when structural barriers and coping needs are treated as core services. The teachers in this study showed that expectancy, enacted through high-expectation routines and clear value framing, can convert compliance paperwork into progress that students can feel and see. The frameworks of Pygmalion, HET, and EVT together explain why these moves matter and Chapter 6 translates them into system-level routines schools can adopt now. Done well, virtual transition services do more than meet a mandate; they build the habits, artifacts, and partnerships that carry students into work, education, and independent living after high school. This study shows that virtual transition planning succeeds when expectation signals are intentional, relational, and system supported.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: April 11, 2025 **IRB#:** 18396

Principal Investigator: Amanda Duke

Approval Date: 04/10/2025

Exempt Category: Category 2

Study Title: TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND COMMUNICATION: NAVIGATING BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS IN POST-HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION ACTIVITIES FOR SPED STUDENTS IN A VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOL

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. 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.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- 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.
- Notify the IRB 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,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix B: Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in research about how special education teachers in a virtual charter school perceive, communicate, and navigate expectations during post-high school transition planning for SPED students.

If you agree to participate, you will complete one virtual interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Your audio recordings may be used in University research reports unless you tell me not to do this.

You may experience these risks by participating in this research:
You will be asked to answer questions about your professional experiences that may trigger strong emotional reactions or discomfort. If you feel uncomfortable, you may skip any question or stop participation at any time.

Audio recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio recordings. If this occurred, your identity and the statements you made could become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

Data collected online or by a device and transmitted electronically: You will be asked to participate in an interview conducted via Zoom as part of this research. The organization hosting the data collection platform has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may gain access to, or retain your data or your IP address which could be used to re-identify you. No assurance can be made as to their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

You may experience these benefits: While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation may help improve transition services for special education students in virtual schools.

There is no compensation for participating in this research.

Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will be confidential.

Can we include your name with any quotes? ___ Yes ___ No

We will not share your data or use it in future research.

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree for data records to include identifiable information? ___Yes ___ No
Do you agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name? ___ Yes ___ No
Do you agree to have your name reported with quoted material? ___Yes ___ No
Do you agree for your data to be archived for scholarly and public access? ___Yes ___ No

I will not request access to any personal or student records.
Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes ___ No
Do you consent to video recording? __ Yes ___ No

I will not take photos during this research.

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? ___Yes ___ No

Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

If you have questions about this research, please contact:
Amanda Duke, Principal Investigator Email: aduke@ou.edu
Timothy Ford, Faculty Advisor Email: tgford@ou.edu

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

Do you agree to participate in this research? ___Yes ___ No

Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed?
_____ (note response)

Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____

Appendix C: Permission to Access Research Site

Research Proposal for 04/01/2025 - 12/31/2025 at [redacted]

This Proposal shall govern the terms by which the research conducted by Amanda Duke shall take place at or including students, teachers, and/or administrators of [redacted] the (the "Project"). This proposal shall be subject to approval by the Superintendent of [redacted] and shall be effective on the date of signature indicated below.

Program Overviews

This research will explore how special education (SPED) teachers at [redacted] perceive, communicate, and navigate expectations during post-high school transition planning for students with disabilities in virtual learning. The goal is to understand teachers' experiences better and identify supports and challenges unique to the virtual setting as they prepare students for employment, education, or independent living after graduation. The school's name will not be included in any published reports or presentations. Instead, a general descriptor or pseudonym (e.g., 'Virtual Learning Academy') will be used to protect the identity of the school and its staff."

Research Design

This qualitative study uses semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with certified SPED teachers. The researcher will conduct virtual interviews lasting 45-60 minutes via Zoom or phone. Interviews will be audio recorded (with permission), transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to teacher expectations, communication strategies, and transition planning practices.

Research Activities

- Upon approval of this research proposal by [redacted], this document will serve as administrative approval to begin recruitment.
- Recruit certified SPED teachers by sending an email invitation through the school email address.
- Conduct individual, one-on-one virtual interviews using Zoom based on participant preference.
- Obtain participant consent for audio recording prior to each interview.
- Audio record interviews for accuracy and transcribe recordings.
- Review transcripts, remove any identifying information, and assign pseudonyms.
- Code and analyze interview data to identify themes and patterns related to teacher expectations, communication strategies, and transition planning experiences.
- No experimental activities, classroom observations, student involvement, or student data collection will occur at any time.

Research Questions

1. How do SPED teachers perceive the value and purpose of post-high school transition activities for SPED students in virtual charter schools?
2. How do SPED teachers communicate the value and purpose of post-high school transition activities to SPED students in virtual charter schools?
3. What supports and challenges do SPED teachers report about transition activities for SPED students in virtual charter schools?



IRB NUMBER: 18396
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/10/2025

Student Data

No student data will be collected. This study involves only teacher participants reflecting on their professional experiences.

Privacy Protection

All information collected in this study will be kept private. Any information gathered will be used only for research purposes and will never be shared outside the research team. After the study is over, all records will be destroyed that contain personal information about any individual. Aggregated or anonymized data collected from this study may be used in future research studies or with other researchers, or for other purposes, including publication. At all times the research shall be conducted in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA).

Non-interference with School Activities

All Research Activities will be conducted in a manner that will not interfere with the normal operation of the school. The administration may at any time effect a suspension of any Research Activities if they are deemed to be disruptive to the normal activities of the School. If the project is approved the school will encourage participation by its personnel however, no individual personnel may be obligated to participate in any studies, interviews, or other research activities.

Contribution to [redacted] and Field of Education

A final report describing the results of the study will be shared with the district and educators of [redacted]. In other reports / dissemination efforts (e.g., conferences), the identity of the school district and those of individuals (educators and students) will not be revealed. Reports will only be made with aggregated or anonymized data.

By completing and signing this form you always agree to conduct the Project in accordance with the terms indicated herein.

Name: Amanda Duke

Organization: University of Oklahoma

Title: Doctoral Candidate / Principal Investigator

Signature: Amanda Duke

Approval

This Project has been approved by the Superintendent of [redacted] after review and advice, the school hereby agrees to allow the Project to take place under the terms indicated herein.

Superintendent [redacted]

[redacted]

Signature

IRB NUMBER: 18396
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/10/2025

Appendix D: Script for Soliciting Volunteers

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study on Virtual SPED Transition Planning

Dear [Participant's Name],

My name is Amanda Duke, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma. I am conducting a research study exploring how special education teachers in virtual charter schools perceive, communicate, and navigate expectations during post-high school transition planning for SPED students.

Your experience as a SPED teacher in a virtual setting makes you a valuable participant in this study.

What's Involved:

If you agree to participate, you will take part in a one-time virtual interview (via Zoom) lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will focus on your experiences supporting SPED students through transition planning activities in the virtual environment. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy.

Participation is completely voluntary, and your identity and responses will be kept confidential. There is no compensation for participation, but your insights may help improve transition services and practices in virtual schools.

Interested?

If you are interested in participating or have questions, please reply to this email or contact me directly at 405.695.5257. I'll be happy to share more details or schedule your interview at a time that works best for you.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to share your expertise and contribute to this important area of research.

Sincerely,

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Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Purpose: To explore how SPED teachers perceive, communicate, and navigate the challenges of implementing post-high school transition activities for SPED students in a virtual charter school setting.

1. Tell me about your background. How did you become a special education teacher in a virtual charter school?
2. How do you define "transition activities" in the context of special education, and what role do they play in your students' educational experience?
    a. Can you walk me through the process you use to set transition-related goals, such as career readiness or independent living skills, for a specific student?
    b. What factors (e.g., IEP goals, student needs, past performance, family involvement) influence your decisions when creating these goals?
3. How do you communicate transition goals, expectations, and their value to your students in the virtual setting?
    a. Can you describe specific strategies or techniques you use to help students understand the importance of transition activities and post-high school planning?
    b. What differences, if any, do you notice in your communication strategies for transition goals in a virtual setting compared to a traditional brick-and-mortar school?
4. What challenges do you face when facilitating career readiness or communicating the value of transition activities to your students in the virtual setting?
    a. How do you address these challenges to ensure students remain engaged and motivated in their transition activities?
5. Can you share an example where your expectations or communication strategies influenced a student's engagement or motivation in transition activities?
    a. What indicators or feedback help you assess whether your students understand and value the transition goals or expectations you communicate?
    b. Can you share how your communication strategies for transition activities have evolved and what may have prompted those changes?
    c. Have your expectations or communication strategies around transition planning changed over time? If so, what prompted those changes?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience supporting SPED students with transition activities in a virtual charter school setting

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Appendix F: Transition Planning Codebook

Theme	Subtheme	Definition	Example from transcripts
Expectation Signals (High Expectations)	Belief → Action	Teacher demonstrates belief through concrete actions that lower barriers (time, money, presence). Exclude generic praise without action.	Brittany pays a college application fee so the student can submit: "there was like an $18 application fee… I'm paying for it because you're going to go to college." (Brittany Ellison)
	Real-talk / Reality-check	Candid framing of adult realities and consequences to lift expectations. Include "not a game/real life" talk; exclude shaming.	"This is life. This isn't a game… We can't stay on the couch forever." (Melissa Crane).
	High-challenge affirmations	Explicit "you can do hard things" messages that set a challenging, do-able bar.	"They can do hard things… you don't have to give up just because life is difficult." (Erica Malone).
Communication Strategies	Feed-forward next steps	Teacher gives stepwise, do-it-now guidance (model, scaffold, co-complete). Exclude past-tense review.	"Let's do it together… let me give you a sentence starter… paste it in the chat… copy it into your Google Doc." (Dr. Carla Whitaker).
	Value framing (money, independence)	Teacher links tasks to money, independence, safety, or family responsibilities to increase perceived value.	"You talk money to them… their attitude changes just like that." (Melissa Crane).
	Persistence & routines (reminders, texting)	Purposeful cadence of reminders, check-ins, and family messaging that sustain momentum.	"I can pick up my phone… they're gonna pick up their phone 24 hours a day… I use 4-1-1 and 9-1-1 messages with families." (Angela Moreno).

Student Agency & Personalization	Student-led goal setting	Students author or co-author goals; teacher positions themselves as guide. Exclude goals written solely by staff.	"I want them to make their own goals… if I set a goal, it's what I want." (Marsha DeWitt).
	Interest-based mapping	Teacher maps local opportunities to student interests; imagines tasks with the student.	"We pull out a map… here's the pizza place… talk about each one… envision ourselves doing this." (Brittany Ellison).
	Informal interview as assessment	Conversational probing to surface goals/needs; used intentionally to drive plans.	"The informal interview… is probably the most beneficial one." (Erica Malone).
Transition Task Mastery	Application & résumé literacy	Direct teaching or co-completion of applications, résumés, forms.	"They hate to fill out applications… let's just walk through it together… 'Oh, that wasn't so bad.'" (Brittany Ellison).
	Workplace soft skills & habits	Instruction/practice on punctuality, communication, completing tasks, time management.	"They don't look at the soft skills… punctual… getting work done on time. I build it in every 2–3 sessions." (Dr. Carla Whitaker).
	Progress logging & reflection	Ongoing logs, artifacts, and reflections that make growth visible and portable.	"We keep a Google Doc log… what did you learn?… 'If I don't have them make a note of it, they don't remember.'" (Dr. Carla Whitaker). .
Family Partnership	Independence coaching with families	Tough but constructive conversations with caregivers to foster student independence.	"You're not gonna wipe his rear till he's 26… He needs to be independent." (Angela Moreno).

	Fast, usable channels	Practical communication systems that increase follow-through (texts, checklists, simple routines).	"I can text parents… give a checklist for 20 days… and we review it." (Angela Moreno).
Context: Virtual vs. Brick-and-Mortar	Affordances (media, tours, one-on-one)	Using virtual tools (YouTube, virtual tours) and one-on-one time to make careers concrete.	"They love YouTube… job searches… and Votech—we've taken tours before." (Marsha DeWitt).
	Constraints (less daily contact)	Limited daily presence, scheduling, and reliance on family support; making limited time count.	"Only getting to see them once a week… when you are with them, you've got to make that time count." (Melissa Crane).
Mental Health & Emotional Readiness	Coping skills & supports	Intentional use of SEL/mental-health programs, daily check-ins, scaffolds before or alongside transitions.	"She did EmpowerU… learned coping strategies… that class probably saved her life." (Angela Moreno).
	Prevalence & triage	Recognizing mental-health load and adapting expectations/entry points accordingly.	"I see more mental health [needs in *VLA*]… that's been an issue." (Melissa Crane).
Structural Barriers & Equity	Transportation & license readiness	Addressing driver's licenses, rides, and local transit gaps as prerequisites for work/school.	"I'm trying to get his driver's license… what if Mom gets sick and needs to go to the doctor—who can drive her?" (Melissa Crane).
	Competing responsibilities (work hours)	Full-time work or caregiving that competes with transition tasks.	"Many… are already working full time, and then going to Epic at night." (Dr. Carla Whitaker).

	Academic-skill / goal fit	Matching goals to reading/academic levels to prevent discouragement; proposing hands-on alternatives.	"If reading is 2nd–3rd grade, I encourage hands-on options or tech school." (Brittany Ellison).
Community Exposure & Services	DRS/Voc Rehab	Engaging DRS/Voc Rehab to expand options; helping families complete forms.	"I'm a Voc Rehab baby… they paid for all my school… I try to use all those avenues." (Melissa Crane
	Tours & real-world exposure	Plant/tech-center visits, job shadowing, or virtual walk-throughs to "make it real."	"I try to even take them on tours when the plant is open… let them see things." (Melissa Crane).
Monitoring & Accountability	Return to the goal sheet	Re-surfacing goals with students, comparing against timelines, and renegotiating next steps.	"We constantly go back to their goal sheets… you didn't make your 6-month goal—what happened?" (Angela Moreno).