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# TECHNICALLY INVITED: INDIGENOUS PARENTS EXPERIENCES AS TRANSITION TEAM MEMBERS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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GOD-Creator has been my heart throughout every time stamp in life. I want to give special appreciation to those who have profoundly impacted my life and journey and would like to recognize the support I received from those who encouraged me to begin this journey despite any perceived obstacles. I was never the easiest child—or adult—to be around, yet my family and my forever sisters and brothers loved me through it all and never gave up on me. Words alone cannot convey the immense gratitude I hold for their unwavering love and support. Mvto to all those who have laid the foundation for safety, wellbeing, and goodwill for us.

I used pseudonyms for the participants in this study. The pseudonyms were chosen from the names of women in my life who inspired me to begin and persevere through this challenging 5½-year journey toward earning my Ph.D. Some of these women continue to walk beside me today, while others have journeyed on to heaven. Each of you has supported and loved me through every season of my life, and for that, I am forever thankful.

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love, and unwavering belief in me shaped the person I am today. My Dad, though no longer here, your strength and work ethic continue to guide me. You showed love in your own quiet way and knowing you spoke proudly of me means more than words can express.

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## ABSTRACT

Indigenous students represent approximately 1% of the overall public school population in the United States; yet, they are disproportionately represented among students receiving special education services. National data indicate that American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students experience higher rates of disability identification than their non-Indigenous peers, underscoring the need for public schools to better understand and respond to the cultural contexts of the Indigenous families they serve. Despite the central role families play in promoting positive postsecondary outcomes, Indigenous family involvement in special education transition planning remains underexamined in the research literature.

This qualitative phenomenological study examined how Indigenous families conceptualize their involvement in postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities and how they experience their relationalities with public schools. Guided by Indigenous relational methodologies, the study centered family voices to understand perceptions of involvement and responsibility, school–family relationships, cultural respect, and barriers and facilitators to meaningful collaboration. Participants were five AI/AN caregivers of transition-age students (ages 16–21) receiving special education services in rural public schools in southeastern Oklahoma. Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted in person or via videoconference and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Four primary themes emerged from the data (a) cultural identity as strength, (b) parent advocacy and collaboration, (c) communication and accountability, and (d) strong aspirations, weak transition support. Findings reveal that Indigenous families hold high aspirations for their children's futures and engage in sustained advocacy, often compensating for limited guidance, inconsistent communication, and compliance-driven transition processes. Although families

valued relationships grounded in trust and respect, they frequently experienced transition planning as lacking cultural responsiveness and relational accountability.

These findings highlight the importance of re-envisioning postsecondary transition planning as a relational, culturally grounded process that honors Indigenous family knowledge, collective responsibility, and community-based aspirations. Implications are discussed for transition practice, educator preparation, and policy, emphasizing the need to move beyond procedural compliance toward meaningful, reciprocal family–school partnerships that support equitable postsecondary outcomes for Indigenous students with disabilities. *Keywords:* American Indian Students with disabilities, Indigenous students with disabilities, Native American students with disabilities, postsecondary transition, special education, evidence-based transition practices

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The following land acknowledgment statement was developed in 2020 by the OU Land Acknowledgement Working Group.

Long before the University of Oklahoma was established, the land on which the University now resides was the traditional home of the “Hasinais” Caddo Nation and “Kirikirʔi:s” Wichita & Affiliated Tribes.

We acknowledge this territory once also served as a hunting ground, trade exchange point, and migration route for the Apache, Comanche, Kiowa and Osage nations.

Today, 39 tribal nations dwell in the state of Oklahoma as a result of settler and colonial policies that were designed to assimilate Native people.

The University of Oklahoma recognizes the historical connection our university has with its Indigenous community. We acknowledge, honor and respect the diverse Indigenous peoples connected to this land. We fully recognize, support and advocate for the sovereign rights of all of Oklahoma’s 39 tribal nations. This acknowledgement is aligned with our university’s core value of creating a diverse and inclusive community. It is an institutional responsibility to recognize and acknowledge the people, culture and history that make up our entire OU Community

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"Our healing begins with storytelling.**"** (Wilson, 2008)

Hesci! I am Brooki Fek'seko Fixico (fight with no heart in war) and I am a citizen of the Mvskoke (Mvskokvlke) (Creek) Nation, as well as the Seminole and a descendant of the Chickasaw Nation. Due to enrollment legislation, we can only be enrolled in one Tribal Nation. We are a matrilineal nation, and we follow the mother's bloodline. It is my honor to share this background with my ancestors and relatives. I am the daughter of the Kaaccvlke [tiger] (mother's) and Nokose [bear] (father's) bloodlines. My father occupied an esteemed position in the tribe as the second ceremonial chief at our grounds, and as medicine man, dedicated to making medicine for healing in our community. My mother, father, aunties, and uncles are fluent speakers of the Mvskoke language. I am dedicated to upholding the values of my family and ancestors by actively contributing to the wellbeing of our present and future generations. These values have been shared and passed down since the beginning of time and guide our relationship with the world around us.

As a Native student in elementary school who had to relocate from a familiar rural community to an urban environment, life presented considerable challenges but also offered valuable opportunities for growth. I was one of the few Native students in the entire school with invisible disabilities, which produced significant challenges throughout my life. In the early years of my education, my family did the best they could to support my learning needs. At that time, any students with a disability were secluded from non-disabled students in what we called "portables," prefabricated buildings that were unattached to the school building and provided additional classroom space. Though my parents were brought up during an era when families, and especially parents of color, refrained from expressing their concerns regarding the educational systems, they were adamant that they did not want me in a class solely students who had

disabilities. My mother once recounted a memory of driving past the elementary school I attended during our recess, where she observed me walking along the fence line alone. She expressed that it pained her to see me walking alone. Although things improved after moving to a different school district, I consistently felt a sense of loneliness due to the lack of students and teachers who shared my racial or ethnic background. That feeling of loneliness has been with me throughout all my educational pursuits and career experiences to this day.

These feelings and experiences motivate my dedication to equitable education and ensuring that students from different backgrounds, including socio-economic, race, ethnicity, and gender can benefit from their educational experiences. I am driven by a constant concern that these students' education will be marred by the same feelings of loneliness that have stalked my educational journey. As a graduate student, I became interested in ways to subvert Western, colonial frameworks of special education. My hope is that through this work I can provide support and guidance to Native American students with disabilities and their families as they navigate the special education and postsecondary transition process. By promoting the wellbeing our people through positive outcomes for these students, I am fulfilling the values instilled in me by my family and my Tribal community.

**Postsecondary Transition**

The process of transition planning laid out in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 necessitates a meticulous approach to overcoming the obstacles that students with disabilities (SWD) will encounter in their adult lives and providing them with the necessary support and guidance to effectively meet these challenges. Transition plans must include a coordinated set of activities in postsecondary education and training, employment, and independent living (Williams-Diehm et al., 2018) and take into account the student's strengths

(what they are good at doing), preferences (how they learn best, what they choose), interests (what they like to do), and needs (what transition skills they need to be taught, which will become the annual transition goals) (IDEA, 2004; Test, Mazzoti et al., 2009). Student-driven transition plans that support the "Whole" student should be a goal when developing effective post-secondary transition plans (Kohler et al., 2016; Landmark et al., 2010).

Disability consists of a wide spectrum of visible and invisible impairments, including physical, mental, and emotional capacities. According to Pendharkar (2023), the prevalence of students receiving special education services in the United States has doubled across the past 45 years. Roughly 7.2%, or roughly 2.6 million, of the 36.7 million households with children under 18 had at least one child with a disability in 2019. IDEA (2004) guarantees that parents are included as a member of their child's individualized education program (IEP) team and meaningfully contribute their child's transition plan development. Parental involvement supports parents' rights to advocate for their student when services fall short. High school is an important step towards students with disabilities' (SWDs) future, preparing them for education, jobs, and eventually greater independence (Bouck & Joshi, 2015; Francis & Reed, 2019). Data indicates SWDs are statistically less likely to go on to post-secondary education, have decreased rates of employment, and have a lesser likelihood of independent living (Kermanian, 2023). Thus, it is imperative for the IEP team, including school personnel and families, to engage in effective collaboration and planning to create an appropriate transition plan (Francis et al., 2018; Papay & Bambara, 2014).

Unfortunately, for culturally and linguistically diverse parents, limited collaboration tends to occur (Francis & Reed, 2019; Hirano et al., 2018; Perkins, 2021; Wilt & Morningstar, 2018). This is also true for AI/AN families with students with disabilities (Landmark et al., 2007).

Indigenous students with disabilities are least likely to complete high school when compared to all populations of students with disabilities (Schifter, 2016).

The challenges of systemic inequities have persisted for many years. Cruz et al. (2021) indicate that culturally and linguistically diverse students have been disproportionally identified due to biases in referrals and evaluations. The overrepresentation of Indigenous students in special education and the consequences of their disproportionate identification are undeniably causes for concern. According to Ogata et al. (2006), Indigenous children and their families face challenges in special education in the form of accessing culturally relevant instruction and discipline procedures, biased evaluation practices, and providing support to the families. Other factors, including poverty, inadequate general education instruction, and scanty professional development for individuals who work with children from diverse backgrounds, contribute to challenges faced by these students and their families (Kreskow, 2013).

**Statement of the Problem**

In the U.S., Indigenous students are enrolled in public schools, representing just 1% of the overall population in the U.S. (Castagono & Brayboy, 2008; Faircloth et al., 2015; Irwin et al., 2022). However, data shows AI/NA students represent 19% of the population of students receiving special education services (NCES, 2022). This aligns with data collected through the American Community Survey (ACS) which shows that AI/AN people have a higher prevalence of disability than their counterparts from other races (Erikson et al., 2022). As mentioned above, AI/AN students are less likely to complete high school than their peers from other races, and the high school completion rate for these students drops even lower when they are identified with a disability (Faircloth & Tippeconic, 2010). After high school, AI/NA students with disabilities are faced with poorer postsecondary outcomes including lower employment rates, lower rates of educational attainment, and higher instances of poverty (Applequist et al., 2009; Brayboy et al.,

2015; Castagono & Brayboy, 2008; Erikson et al., 2022; Faircloth et al., 2015; Faircloth & Tippeconic, 2010; Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure-Roholt, 2017).

The parent involvement principal of IDEA (2004) guarantees parents the right to collaborate as equal members of the IEP team, which could support the transition planning process by ensuring a seamless move into life beyond high school. After all, SWDs' families will play a bigger role in their daily lives after leaving school than their former teachers. Effects of student and family involvement in the transition planning process continues to be a research focus for the U.S. Department of Education (Semples & Cui, 2024). Yet, with all the evidence indicating better results from parent involvement and engagement and legal mandates to include students and families, researchers note that students and families are not fully included and engaged (Rossetti et al., 2018). Fully involving and engaging families in the transition planning process remains a significant concern, especially for culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities.

Research has revealed that Native students with disabilities who have powerful circles of support contribute to preparing for a better post-secondary outcome (Graham & Eadens, 2017). The family-professional partnership is defined by Turnbull et al. (2015) as a relationship in which families and schools concur to draw on each other's knowledge and resources, as appropriate, to develop and carry out decisions that will directly help students and everyone (p. 16). Building these relationships is crucial. But, in research involving culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families' engagement in the IEP and transition process, parents reported barriers including communication, limited community supports and resources, deficitbased discourse, mistrust due to past negative experiences, and negative attitudes from professionals (Rossetti et al., 2018; Wilt & Morningstar, 2018). In a 2022 systematic review of Indigenous parents' educational engagement, Sianturi et al. affirmed these findings, identifying barriers such as

parents' experiences with schools and cultural matters, diverse family life and circumstances, and lack of school support and openness for parents' input. Further Sianuri's review notes that many Indigenous families are active in the education of their children. However, their ways of being involved and engaged may be perceived differently by teachers unfamiliar with students and families from Native cultures, an issue also noted by other researchers (Garrett, 1995).

Consequently, there is a need for public schools to better understand the backgrounds and cultures of the Indigenous students and families they serve. To develop strategies and practices that support meaningful Indigenous family involvement in transition planning, we must redirect our research process and approach it through the lens of families we wish to empower. It is imperative to identify strategies for overcoming the barriers reported by Indigenous families to increase and support their involvement in the transition planning process.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to critically examine and center lived experiences of Indigenous parents and families regarding post-secondary transition planning within Oklahoma public schools. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the extent to which Indigenous families perceive themselves to be valued, respected, and meaningfully included throughout the transition planning process, which plays a critical role in shaping post-school outcomes for Indigenous students with disabilities.

Through the relational examination of family narratives and stories, this study will explore (a) Indigenous parents' and families' perceptions of their roles, responsibilities, and involvement in the transition planning process; (b) their experiences with school–family relationships, including the degree to which cultural values, identities, and ways of knowing are acknowledged and honored by school personnel; and (c) the structural, cultural, and relational

barriers, as well as facilitators, that influence Indigenous families' engagement and sense of partnership within transition planning.

By systematically analyzing participants' stories to identify recurring patterns and themes, this study aims to generate community-grounded, holistic insights that can inform the development of culturally sustaining strategies to strengthen Indigenous parental and family involvement in secondary transition planning. These strategies are intentionally rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, relational accountability, and community experiences rather than deficit-based or compliance-driven models of family engagement.

Family–professional alliances are foundational to effective transition planning and are characterized by shared responsibility, mutual respect, equality, open communication, and collaborative problem-solving (Summers et al., 2005). Accordingly, a central goal of this study is to amplify Indigenous family voices and share findings with Native Nations, Indigenous education researchers, and key stakeholders, including families, tribal and state education departments, school faculty and administrators, policymakers, and health agencies, who influence educational planning and transition services.

This study is particularly timely given Oklahoma's failure to meet Indicator 13 targets, which addresses secondary transition planning in the State Performance Plan/ Annual Performance Report for state formula grant programs under IDEA (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2023). Because family involvement is a well-established predictor of effective secondary transition outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2021), a critical need exists to re-envision transition planning practices in ways that move beyond procedural compliance and toward culturally responsive, relationship-centered approaches that honor Indigenous families as essential partners in the transition process.

## Research Questions

The following research question provided direction and continued focus during the study (1) How do families conceptualize their involvement in the special education postsecondary transition planning and their relationalities with the public schools? The families' experiences and perspectives will be examined to identify (a) their involvement and responsibilities regarding the transition planning process, (b) their relationships with the school and if cultural values are respected, and (c) unique barriers or positive aspects to their involvement and relationalities with the school.

## A Brief Overview of Methods

This study used a phenomenological design selected to employ qualitative methods to understand the shared core experience between participants (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenological interviews involve establishing a strong connection between the researcher and the interviewee, which promotes open and respectful communication. The discussion questions that guided the interviews encourage families to conceptualize their involvement in transition planning and their relationships with the public schools as stories or other components they are comfortable relating to the researcher in the given setting.

Participants in this study were five AI/AN caregivers (parents/guardians) of transition age (16-21) secondary students who receive special education services. The students are enrolled in rural Oklahoma public schools located in the southeastern part of the state. Interviews were Zoom to accommodate caregivers' schedules. Participants received a $60 gift card as a thankyou for sharing their experiences. After interviews were completed, they were transcribed and underwent thematic analysis. In-depth methods descriptions and complete analysis and findings are located in Chapters 3 and 4.

## Study Setting

This study takes place in Oklahoma. My home state presents a unique context for this study because 39 Tribal Nations reside in the state. According to the Oklahoma State Department of Education (2021), over 70% of Oklahoma school districts are located within the Tribal boundaries. More than 150,000 Native American students are enrolled in Oklahoma public schools and over 400 Title VI Indian Education programs operated across the state for the 2024–2025 school year. As of 2024, Native American students represent about 15% of Oklahoma's total student population—one of the highest percentages in the U.S. (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2024a). About 17% of Oklahoma students receive special education services, just above the national average of 15% (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2022). However, unlike national data that shows a significant disparity in AI/AN students' enrollment and special education participation (1% to 19%), special education participation of AI/AN students in Oklahoma is much more proportional to their overall enrollment in OK public schools (15% enrolled to 12.5% in SPED) (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2024a). Additionally, 94% of parents who responded to a state survey reported schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2022). Because of these factors, it is likely that families of Native students with disabilities have had experiences in postsecondary transition planning and thus can provide information regarding experiences in this process.

## Terms Used

Throughout this dissertation, I use the words American Indian, Indigenous, Native, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) to talk about Tribal Nations within the United States. There are 579 federally recognized Tribes, and each one has its own unique traditions, beliefs,

and ways of life. Because of this diversity, no single term can fully describe all Native peoples. Whenever I can, I use the specific name of the tribal nation I am referring to show respect and accuracy. Interviews retain the word choice of the interviewee. The following terminologies and definitions are used throughout the dissertation.

- **College and Career Readiness:** Is defined broadly as an individual's ability to thrive in both post-secondary education and the workforce (Balestreri, et al, 2014; Monahan et al., 2020).
- **Community:** There is no single definition of community that applies to every situation. Culture and traditions vary greatly between Native American communities. Native American individuals and communities also vary in adherence to their cultures of origin and to Western cultural values and beliefs. For many Native American people, spirituality and religion are generally perceived as an integral aspect of culture.

  Spirituality also takes on many forms within Native American communities, from the use of traditional Indigenous practices to Christian beliefs.
- **Culture:** Culture and traditions vary greatly between Native American communities. Native American individuals and communities also vary in adherence to their cultures of origin and to Western cultural values and beliefs. For many Native American people, spirituality and religion are generally perceived as an integral aspect of culture.

  Spirituality also takes on many forms within Native American communities, from the use of traditional Indigenous practices to Christian beliefs (UNM Health Science Center, 2012).
- **Disability:** Many tribal languages do not have a word for disability (Lovern, 2008). However, disability defined in U.S. policies relating to disabilities as a physical or mental

impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

- **Neo-Nuclear:** An extended family is a family that consists of several generations. Family members who share a home or reside close to one another often rely on one another.
- **Parent Involvement Engagement:** There is not one single, unified definition in the existing literature. Parental involvement is defined as the degree to which a parent participates in her child's education and everyday life (Hornby, 2011). The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) described family involvement as a collaborative effort wherein educational institutions, community agencies, and organizations make a concerted effort to involve families in a meaningful manner.
- **Postsecondary/Transition Plan:** A transition plan in an IEP helps students prepare for life after high school by setting specific, measurable goals based on assessments of their needs in education, employment, and independent living. It has a customized plan with services and support to assist with obtaining their goals. Tracks how well they're doing to make sure they reach those goals and is well-noted by using effective methods for tracking progress (Tennell, 2024).
- **Secondary Transition Indicators:** These indicators serve as measurement techniques that measure how well a state is following the IDEA, Part B. Each state is required by the IDEA to make a state performance plan (SPP) or yearly performance report (APR) that shows how well the state is doing at implementing the IDEA. Planning for the transition to high school is so important to the success of kids that it has four signs (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2023).

- **Sovereignty:** The concept of sovereignty has been defined as the inherent right of a people, the fundamental right to self-govern, self-determine, and educate themselves (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).
- **Tribal Sovereignty**: "Sovereignty" is the authority of a state or nation to govern itself. Tribal sovereignty in the United States provides federally recognized Indigenous tribes with the inherent authority for self-governance. However, the federal government recognizes tribes as "domestic, dependent nations," meaning that they have local sovereignty but not full sovereignty as other nations worldwide. Thus, many Native American communities in the USA are, or belong to, locally sovereign nations and, thus, have their own governance, laws, and leaders that function independently (UNM Health Science Center, 2012).
- **Transition Services:** Transition services are tailored to meet the unique needs of each student. The services encompass a range of components such as instruction, related services, community experiences, the evolution of occupation, and the other post-high school adult-living objectives, and, if needed, the obtaining of everyday living skills and a functional vocational evaluation (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2023).

## Organization

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study by outlining the problem, purpose, background, and significance, along with the research questions, key definitions, and an overview of the methodological approach. This chapter establishes the foundational context for examining Indigenous family involvement in postsecondary transition planning and frames the study's central focus.

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature relevant to Indigenous students with disabilities and their transition experiences. The chapter includes research on family involvement

in the IEP transition process, culturally and linguistically diverse family participation, and the historical and contemporary contexts shaping education for American Indian/Alaska Native students. This chapter identifies key gaps—particularly the limited representation of Indigenous families in transition research—and highlights the strengths and cultural assets that shape Indigenous family engagement.

Chapter Three includes additional literature detailing the methodological framework guiding this study. It explains the use of a qualitative phenomenological design, grounded in Indigenous relational methodologies, to explore how families make meaning of their involvement in transition planning. Emphasizing relational accountability, reciprocity, and story as knowledge, this chapter demonstrates how phenomenology and Indigenous relational approaches together provide an ethically aligned and culturally responsive method for addressing the research questions and responding to the gaps identified in Chapter Two.

Chapter Four presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with participating caregivers. Through thematic analysis, four interconnected themes emerged: (1) Cultural Identity as Strength, (2) Parent Advocacy and Uneven IEP Participation, (3) Communication Gaps and Systemic Inequities, and (4) Strong Aspirations and Limited Transition Support. These themes illuminate the lived experiences of Indigenous families and the relational dynamics that shape their engagement with transition planning.

Chapter Five, the final chapter, includes interpretations and expands upon the findings presented in Chapter Four. I discusses the significance of these results in relation to existing research, Indigenous relational frameworks, and the broader educational context. The chapter also outlines implications for practice, policy, and future research, emphasizing the need for relational, culturally grounded approaches that honor Indigenous families as partners in transition planning.

This dissertation is intended for use by researchers, practitioners, and counselors, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous, working with Native peoples and their respective communities. As an American Indian teacher, it is my responsibility to navigate and analyze past and current postsecondary programs and resources to share with stakeholders in the communities.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature related to Indigenous students with disabilities and family involvement in the postsecondary transition process. By examining existing research and relevant policy, this review establishes a foundation for understanding current approaches to family involvement in transition planning and evaluates their appropriateness for use with Indigenous families.

Although the rights guaranteed to parents under the IDEA (2004) are intended to protect students with disabilities and promote positive educational outcomes, IDEA, along with the ADA and Section 504, operates within an educational system that was not designed with Indigenous peoples, cultures, or epistemologies in mind. Although these statutes provide important protections related to access and services, public schooling has historically functioned as a site of exclusion and assimilation for Native students (Lomawaima, 1994; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Sabzalian, 2019). Any conversation about supporting Native families and students with disabilities must therefore begin by recognizing that such support occurs within a system that has long marginalized Indigenous peoples, making efforts to promote their inclusion and collaboration ethically complex (Bang, et al., 2019). The remainder of this chapter reviews transition policy foundations and accountability logics; synthesizes research on family involvement, CLD and Indigenous contexts, and culturally responsive practice; and then articulates the methodological implications that lead to this study's phenomenological design grounded in Indigenous relational methodologies.

## Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities: Policy Foundations and Limits

Today, public-school systems are obligated to educate all children; nonetheless, this has not always been true. In the early years of public education, many students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, races, religions, and those with disabilities were systematically excluded from

attending public schools (Yell, 2020) Programs that accepted students with disabilities offered limited educational benefit and functioned more closely to institutions (Alquraini, 2013; Geishert Gooden, 2022; Prager, 2015). Early court cases related to students with disabilities mainly excluded these students from participating with non-disabled peers. In 1893, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in Watson v. City of Cambridge that a student who was too "weak-minded" to profit from instruction and made unusual noises was troublesome to other students and could be expelled. Similarly, in 1918's Beattie v. Board of Education of Antigo, the Wisconsin Supreme Court held that a student who had cerebral palsy required too much effort on behalf of the teacher and could be excluded from the school, which the student had attended for several years. Perhaps the most well-known example of the systematic exclusion in education is the segregation of black students who were not permitted to attend schools with white students which was overturned in 1954 in Brown v. Board of Education.

**Special Education Statutes and IDEA Essentials**

In 1965, President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Despite this, education was still not accessible for all American children, including those with disabilities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first disability civil rights law and was foundational to the passage Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975. In 1975, Congress passed EHA (Public Law 94-142). Under EHA, a free appropriate public education (FAPE) must be available to all eligible students with disabilities. The law's 1990 restructuring and reauthorization provided the basis for special education as we know it. In 1990, EHA was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Under IDEA, special education is explained as instruction specially designed to meet the unique needs of children who have disabilities and prepare them for employment and independent living provided at the public expense.

Within IDEA, family involvement and transition planning are primarily structured through six foundational principles intended to guarantee access and procedural integrity. These principles include (1) free and appropriate public education (FAPE), (2) appropriate evaluation, (3) individualized education program (IEP), (4) least restrictive environment (LRE), (5) parent and student participation, and (6) procedural safeguards.

FAPE establishes students' entitlement to individualized services at no cost to families, positioning schools as the primary decision-makers responsible for service provision. Appropriate evaluation requires that assessments be conducted using non-discriminatory procedures, with parental consent and periodic reevaluation, formally incorporating families into decision-making while situating expertise within professional systems. The IEP serves as a legally binding document developed by a team that includes parents, outlining present levels, goals, and services intended to ensure meaningful progress. Within this process, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandates inclusion with non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible, reinforcing institutional accountability while often leaving interpretation of "appropriateness" to school personnel. Parent participation is explicitly protected through requirements that families be meaningfully involved in IEP development, placement decisions, and transition planning. Finally, procedural safeguards provide mechanisms such as notice, mediation, and due process through which parents may challenge decisions and enforce their rights when collaboration breaks down.

**Transition Services Under IDEA**

IDEA's 2004 reauthorization strengthened guidelines for postsecondary transition services adding planning and goal setting in education, employment, and, when appropriate, independent living. In these updates, transition planning was defined as a coordinated, resultsoriented process based on age-appropriate assessment to facilitate movement to post-school activities. For

Indigenous families, transition planning unfolds within accountability systems that require schools to document compliance with IDEA. Most visibly through the Indicator 13 checklist of required transition components which inadvertently define "involvement" largely as what gets recorded in the IEP. While this structure can improve consistency, it can also orient practice toward procedural box-checking rather than the reciprocal, culturally grounded relationships Indigenous families describe as necessary for meaningful collaboration (Tennell, 2024).

**Family Involvement in Transition Planning**

Researchers have explored the effects of transition services included in IDEA (2004), leading to broad agreement that quality postsecondary transition planning is vital to ensuring positive postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities (Carter et al., 2012; Carter et al., 2014; Joshi et al., 2017; Mazzotti et al., 2013; Prince et al., 2014; Rowe, 2015). Scholars have identified evidence-based predictors of postschool outcomes (Test, Mazzotti et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2021), with family involvement emerging as consistently beneficial for employment and education after high school.

The 2004 IDEA reauthorization further strengthened the rights of SWD and their families, reinforcing the parent's role as principal advocate and decision maker (Koseki, 2017; Kurth et al., 2020; Rossetti et al., 2021). This aligns with a growing body of research that underscores the positive relation between family involvement in transition planning and postsecondary outcomes (Fourquean et al., 1991; Kohler et al. 2016; Newman et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2012; 2014). From a practical standpoint, family involvement influences career aspirations, values, and practical living arrangements for students with disabilities (Cobb & Alwell, 2009).

### Barriers to Meaningful Involvement

Barriers to family engagement in the IEP and transition planning process are multifaceted. School practices such as professionalized language, deficit-based discourse, and logistical issues (e.g., short meeting times) can hinder family engagement (Geenen et al., 2001; Morris, 2017; Rossetti et al., 2018). Limited resources for transition programs and the absence of real-life instructional contexts also impede progress (Brown, 2023). CLD families may face additional challenges, including specialized jargon and insufficient supports to serve as equal partners (Chang et al., 2022; Landmark et al., 2012; Morris, 2017; Suk et al., 2020). Many of these barriers are magnified for families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, whose experiences have been well documented in the transition literature.

### Limits of the CLD Framework for Indigenous Families

Though research with CLD families has documented barriers such as communication breakdowns, specialized jargon, and role expectations that limit equal participation in IEP/transition processes (e.g., Chang et al., 2022; Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Landmark et al., 2007; Leake et al., 2006; Morris, 2017; Trainor, 2005b; Wilt & Morningstar, 2018), transition research that conceptualizes students solely within CLD or racially minoritized frameworks (Leake et al., 2006; Trainor, 2005a; Wilt & Morningstar, 2018) fails to account for the political, relational, and cultural dimensions shaping ISWD's transition experiences. Brayboy's (2006) Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) foregrounds the liminal status of Indigenous peoples as both a racialized population within the United States and as citizens of sovereign Tribal Nations. This dual positioning is particularly salient in preparing ISWD for postsecondary life, as transition planning must support participation in U.S. social systems while also sustaining responsibility to Indigenous community and Nation-building.

## Indigenous Families, Education, and Disability

The United States government has been directly involved in the education of Indigenous students longer than any other group in the country; yet, Indigenous students with and without disabilities experience poorer postsecondary outcomes than their peers (Applequist, 2009; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Faircloth, 2015; Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017; Hibel et al., 2008; Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010; Tennell, 2024). Early colonial and missionary schooling aimed at religious or vocational instruction displaced Indigenous knowledge systems centered on kinship and relationality (Carney, 1999; Lees & Bang, 2023; Pewewardy et al., 2018; Tennell, 2024). Treaty-era provisions for education were inconsistently honored, and the boarding school era marked forced assimilation and family separation (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Fear-Segal & Rose, 2016; Lomawaima, 1994; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Lomawaima et al., 2018; Peterson, 2013), generating historical trauma that continues to shape schooling experiences (Ficklin et al., 2024; Kirmayer et al., 2014; Skewes & Blume, 2019). The Meriam Report (1928) documented abuses and recommended day/public schools; later policy developments, including the Johnson-O'Malley Act (1934), subsidized public-school attendance for Native students. These shifts unfolded alongside the expansion of tax-funded public schools, often excluding Native students and communities and entrenching mistrust that persists in school–community relations today. Given this history, culturally responsive transition planning for Indigenous students requires more than additive strategies; it calls for a relational paradigm that recognizes family expertise and collective aspirations

## Indigenous Perspectives on Disability and Family/Kinship

Indigenous perspectives on disability are often situated within relational and collective worldviews in which personhood is defined through kinship, reciprocity, and responsibility to family, community, and place. In many communities, collectivism and interdependence—not

individual autonomy—organize social life and moral obligations, shaping how needs are understood and addressed (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Leake et al., 2006; Morris, 2017). This orientation helps explain why Western, individual-deficit notions of "disability" may not map neatly onto Indigenous epistemologies: rather than foregrounding difference as a categorical marker, families emphasize belonging, roles, and contributions to the collective (Lovern, 2008; Rabang et al., 2023). Within such contexts, "cultural identity as strength" is not a metaphor but a practical architecture of support—kin networks, community accountability, and intergenerational teachings that locate learners within webs of relationship and purpose (Beach, 2015).

These relational commitments are enacted through extended kinship systems that stretch well beyond the nuclear household and structure children's care, learning, and identity. Kin networks and intergenerational ties provide security, guidance, and pathways for cultural continuity (Hart, 2010), with mutual respect between younger and older generations functioning as both a value and a pedagogical practice (Beach, 2015; Robins et al., 2013). In education and transition planning, these networks mean that decision-making and goal-setting are shared endeavors: parents, guardians, aunties/uncles, grandparents, and community knowledge holders participate in clarifying aspirations, opportunities to contribute, and supports that honor communal responsibilities (Beach, 2015; Chavez et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2010). This relational ecology also affects communication preferences. For example, students from collectivist cultures may resist forms of disclosure that feel individually exposing or statusthreatening, which can be misread by schools as "lack of self-advocacy" rather than understood as culturally grounded care for relational harmony (Black et al., 2003).

Taken together, these perspectives reframe postsecondary transition planning from an exercise in individually quantifiable outcomes to a person–family–community process rooted in

reciprocity and shared responsibility. When educators approach transition solely through compliance-driven, individually targeted goals (e.g., narrow IEP indicators of independence), they risk misalignment with Indigenous families' priorities and practices of care; conversely, when they center kinship, community responsibility, and interdependence in planning, "cultural identity as strength" becomes a design principle that enhances student engagement, relevance, and sustainability of supports (Achola & Greene, 2016; Beach, 2015; Chavez et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2010). Practically, this means co-constructing goals with extended family, inviting community partners into meetings, and creating spaces that affirm belonging and contribution so that transition plans reflect not only what a student will do as an individual, but also how they will thrive in relationship.

**Cultural Responsiveness and Relational Accountability in Transition**

School systems, policies, and even the celebrated principles of IDEA were not designed with Indigenous peoples in mind. Although civil rights protections expanded access, they did not dismantle structures that marginalize Indigenous epistemologies and family expertise. Although Rehabilitation Act (1973) and the ADA (1990) mandate nondiscrimination and equal access, and IDEA provides entitlements to special education and related services, these statutes operate within schooling systems that were not designed with Indigenous peoples, languages, or epistemologies at their center. The historical and ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, including policies of forced assimilation and schooling projects that sought to sever children from families, cultures, and communities have positioned public education as a site where Indigenous knowledge and relational practices were, and often remain, devalued (Burnette, 2021; Carney, 1999; Faircloth et al., 2016; Fear-Segal & Rose, 2016; Lomawaima,1994; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Lomawaima et al., 2018; Peterson, 2013; Sabzalian, 2019). In this context, legal guarantees of access and individualized services may improve procedural protections without

fundamentally transforming the institutional logics that shape how Indigenous families are invited to participate, how expertise is recognized, and what counts as success. Thus, even well-intended compliance frameworks can inadvertently reproduce conditions in which Indigenous families must conform to school-defined norms of engagement rather than encounter school as a space that honors sovereignty, kinship networks, and community-anchored aspirations.

Recognizing this history renders the ethics of "support" more complex. Efforts to "help" Indigenous families navigate transition planning take place within systems that have been historically hostile to Indigenous existence, languages, and governance; as such, they risk centering procedural navigation over relational repair. A more responsible stance acknowledges that many Indigenous families experience involvement not merely as a set of required steps but as an expression of relational accountability—responsibility, reciprocity, and respect—grounded in ties to family, community, and Nation. From this perspective, meaningful transition planning for Indigenous students with disabilities requires more than access to meetings or the completion of documents; it requires practices that recognize Tribal sovereignty, incorporate community knowledge holders, and co-construct futures that reflect collective responsibilities as well as individual goals. Framed this way, the central question is not simply whether Indigenous families can navigate existing procedures, but whether schools are willing to reorient those procedures toward relationships that uphold cultural continuity, belonging, and self-determination.

**Relational Accountability and Person–Family Centered Planning**

Relationality and relational accountability are Indigenous cultural protocols that emerge from Indigenous paradigms and epistemologies, which understand knowledge as inherently relational rather than individual or abstract (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2001, 2008). Relationality acknowledges the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings and ideas, situating

individuals within networks of relationships that include family, community, ancestors, future generations, the land, and the cosmos (Deloria, 1988; Wilson, 2008). Within this worldview, relationships are not incidental but foundational to meaning-making and responsibility. Relational accountability operationalizes this worldview through the principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, which guide ethical engagement across educational, professional, and research contexts (Washington, 2025; Wilson, 2001, 2008). Respect entails seeking consent and honoring the authority of community members throughout the duration of a partnership. Reciprocity requires that engagement be mutually beneficial, intentionally responsive to community-identified hopes, needs, and aspirations. Responsibility involves transparency, honesty, and an ongoing commitment to how knowledge is used, shared, and returned in ways deemed meaningful by the community.

Applied to family–school partnerships, relational accountability reframes involvement as a sustained ethical obligation rather than a procedural requirement. Rather than asking whether families are "participating," relational accountability invites educators to engage in continual self-reflection, asking: "How am I fulfilling my role in this relationship? and What are my obligations to those with whom I am in relationship?" (Wilson, 2001, p. 177). This shift is particularly significant for Indigenous families, whose engagement with schools has been shaped by historical and ongoing experiences of marginalization and epistemic exclusion. When transition planning processes prioritize efficiency, documentation, or compliance, Indigenous families may experience involvement as superficial or misaligned. In contrast, relational accountability provides a framework for honoring families' cultural strengths, lived experiences, and relational knowledge, positioning families not as recipients of services but as co-holders of expertise and shared responsibility in shaping students' futures.

Person–family centered transition planning offers a practice-based extension of relational accountability within special education contexts. Achola and Greene (2016) emphasize transition planning models that recognize family values, collective goals, and shared responsibility for adulthood preparation, aligning with Indigenous worldviews that privilege interdependence and collective well-being over isolated individual achievement. However, when transition planning is driven primarily by individualistic, compliance-oriented outcomes, such as those emphasized through accountability measures, cultural and relational dimensions of involvement may be overlooked. In these cases, families may perceive transition planning as disconnected from their aspirations and responsibilities to their student, family, community, and Nation. Educators and educational leaders thus occupy a critical role in either maintaining settler colonial logics embedded within schooling structures or actively disrupting them (Washington, 2025). Practicing relational accountability in transition planning offers a means to reorient engagement toward ethical, culturally grounded partnerships that support meaningful involvement and positive outcomes for Indigenous students with disabilities. Taken together, these commitments to relational accountability and person–family centered planning necessitate an approach that centers lived experience, providing the rationale for the study's phenomenological and Indigenous relational methodologies in the chapters that follow.

**Building Relationships**. Rather than emphasizing episodic participation tied to annual IEP meetings, the literature documents the importance of sustained, two-way communication that positions families as ongoing partners in transition planning (Geenen et al., 2001; Greene, 2014; Morris, 2017; Rossetti et al., 2018). Relationship-centered approaches prioritize follow-through and accountability, with educators maintaining predictable channels of communication that reduce information asymmetries and foster trust over time (Achola, 2019; Achola & Greene, 2016, Greene, 2014). Co-constructing transition goals with families, and, when appropriate,

Tribal partners, reflects collective aspirations and affirms families' expertise, aligning transition planning with Indigenous relational values rather than procedural compliance alone.

**Understanding Cultural Differences.** Culturally responsive transition planning further requires educators to recognize and engage the broader relational contexts shaping Indigenous students' lives (Achola, 2019; Tennell, 2024). Integrating Tribal and community partners into transition meetings and service coordination acknowledges the role of Indigenous Nations and extended kinship networks in supporting postsecondary pathways. Embedding cultural practices, values, and locally defined markers of success, such as community contribution and relational responsibility, shifts planning away from narrow, individualistic outcomes. Professional development focused on Indigenous histories, sovereignty, and relational worldviews is therefore essential for educators seeking to move from compliance-oriented engagement toward ethical, reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous families (Gay, 2002; Khalifa et al., 2016; Vincent et al., 2017).

## Methodological Implications: Why Phenomenology and Indigenous Relational

Postsecondary transition scholarship has evolved around "evidence-based" predictors and practices that privilege outcomes amenable to documentation, such as graduation rates, employment, discrete IEP components, while giving comparatively little analytic weight to how families experience transition planning. Canonical reviews (Mazzotti et al., 2016, 2021, Rowe et al., 2021; Test, Fowler et al., 2009; Test, Mazzoti et al., 2009) and guidance documents (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition [NTACT], 2022) have largely built their claims on designs and datasets that treat procedural fidelity and measurability as proxies for effectiveness, often reporting limited or nonspecific racial demographics and subsuming Indigenous participants into residual categories (e.g., "Other," "Multiracial"). Framed this way, the field tends to

universalize findings generated from contexts that seldom reflect Indigenous sovereignty, kinship networks, and community-anchored responsibilities, thereby reinforcing a compliance orientation (e.g., checklist interpretations of Indicator 13) over relational engagement. What results is a knowledge base optimized for what can be counted rather than for the lived meanings that families attach to involvement, collaboration, and culturally grounded aspirations, precisely the dimensions that matter most for Indigenous students with disabilities and their communities.

This procedural tilt is reinforced by how "rigor" is operationalized in the field. Following the Institute of Education Sciences' causality standards (Mazzotti, et al., 2013), NTACT's Levels of Evidence prioritize group experimental designs (including RCTs) and, to a lesser extent, single-case designs (SCDs). In practice, large-sample causal studies often exclude Indigenous students (or subsume them into "Other/Multiracial"), while SCDs, although better suited to small, specific populations, still show no inclusion of Indigenous students in a 10-year scan of experimental studies in CDTEI ($N = 19$) (Mitchell et al., 2024). The consequence is a canon that appears universal and is frequently branded as "effective" or "evidence-based," yet remains empirically underpowered for Indigenous communities and conceptually oriented toward compliance and documentation. As critics have noted, this constitutes a "vanity of rigor": methods that maximize internal validity while minimizing contextual fit and cultural relevance (Cartwright, 2007, p. 18).

Against this backdrop, phenomenology is not an aesthetic preference; it is a methodological necessity. Phenomenology centers meaning-making, in this case, how parents and families experience transition planning, assign significance to interactions, and navigate misalignments between school procedures and community obligations (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Creswell, 1998; Neubauer et al., 2019; Seidman, 2006). By attending to essences shared across

participants lived experiences, phenomenology surfaces the relational, cultural, and ethical contours that procedural metrics and aggregate outcomes routinely miss (e.g., what "involvement" feels like when meetings are experienced as performative, or how "self-advocacy" is interpreted within collectivist kinship networks) (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach makes visible the relational dissonance families encounter when compliance-oriented systems define participation as signatures and artifacts rather than as ongoing, reciprocal partnership. Phenomenology therefore provides the analytic clarity needed to reinterpret "predictors" through the lens of how practices are actually lived by Indigenous families in specific school–community ecologies.

Complementing phenomenology, Indigenous relational methodologies offer an ethical and epistemological stance aligned with the communities at the center of this study (Washington, 2025; Wilson, 2008). Relational accountability, which is grounded in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, treats story as knowledge and relationships as the proper site of inquiry, obligating researchers and educators to co-create value with families and to return findings in community-approved ways. In research regimes where qualitative and Indigenous methods are routinely relegated to the lowest "levels of evidence," these methodologies re-center what counts as evidence by foregrounding sovereignty, kinship networks, and community responsibility as constitutive, not incidental, dimensions of transition. Even NTACT's guidance acknowledges that qualitative work provides indispensable context and understanding in areas with limited research; in Indigenous transition, that context is the very ground on which valid knowledge must be built.

In short, phenomenology clarifies what meanings are at stake, and Indigenous relational methodologies ensure those meanings are pursued in collaboration with communities, not merely about them. Together, they respond to the documented under-representation and proceduralism of

the existing evidence base and align with this dissertation's commitment to honor Indigenous families as knowledge holders in the co-construction of educational futures.

**Synthesis and Identified Gaps**

This literature review reveals four interrelated gaps (1) an overreliance on compliance-driven transition models that prioritize documentation over relationship-building; (2) narrow conceptualizations of "family involvement" that equate participation with attendance, signatures, or discrete tasks rather than ongoing, reciprocal partnership; (3) a paucity of Indigenous-focused transition research that accounts for sovereignty, kinship networks, and community responsibilities; and (4) a lack of relational and phenomenological approaches capable of capturing families' lived meanings of involvement. Accordingly, this study asks how Indigenous families conceptualize and enact their involvement in postsecondary transition planning and adopts a phenomenological, Indigenous relational methodology to investigate these experiences on families' own terms.

# CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of Indigenous families of students with disabilities as they engage in postsecondary transition planning. Qualitative methodologies are particularly well suited for this inquiry because they prioritize meaning, context, and lived experience. Dimensions that scholars note cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By centering participants' voices and narratives, qualitative research allows for a nuanced understanding of how Indigenous families experience and make sense of transition planning processes.

Specifically, this study utilizes a phenomenological research design, which seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon by examining it through the perspectives of individuals who have directly experienced it (Brantlinger, et al., 2005; Creswell, 1998; Neubauer et al., 2019; Seidman, 2006). Phenomenology is widely used in qualitative research and is particularly effective for investigating complex educational experiences because it centers participants' interpretations, meanings, and reflections. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, providing opportunities to build relational connections between the researcher and participants while fostering open, respectful dialogue (Delve & Limpaecher, 2022). Through these interviews, I gained in-depth insight into Indigenous families' experiences with postsecondary transition planning, illuminating both their aspirations and the systemic conditions shaping those experiences

## Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to critically examine and center lived experiences of Indigenous parents and families regarding post-secondary transition planning within Oklahoma public schools. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the extent to which Indigenous

families perceive themselves to be valued, respected, and meaningfully included throughout the transition planning process, which plays a critical role in shaping post-school outcomes for Indigenous students with disabilities.

Through the relational examination of family narratives and stories, this study explored (1) Indigenous parents' and families' perceptions of their roles, responsibilities, and involvement in the transition planning process; (2) their experiences with school–family relationships, including the degree to which cultural values, identities, and ways of knowing are acknowledged and honored by school personnel; and (3) the structural, cultural, and relational barriers, as well as facilitators, that influence Indigenous families' engagement and sense of partnership within transition planning.

By systematically analyzing participants' stories to identify recurring patterns and themes, I aimed to generate community-grounded, holistic insights that can inform the development of culturally sustaining strategies to strengthen Indigenous parental and family involvement in secondary transition planning. These strategies are intentionally rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, relational accountability, and community experiences rather than deficit-based or compliance-driven models of family engagement.

Family–professional alliances are foundational to effective transition planning and are characterized by shared responsibility, mutual respect, equality, open communication, and collaborative problem-solving (Summers et al., 2005). Accordingly, a central goal of this study is to amplify Indigenous family voices and share findings with Native Nations, Indigenous education researchers, and key stakeholders, including families, tribal and state education departments, school faculty and administrators, policymakers, and health agencies, who influence educational planning and transition services.

This study is particularly timely given Oklahoma's failure to meet compliance targets for

Indicator 13, which addresses secondary transition planning in the State Systemic Improvement Plan (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2023). Because family involvement is a wellestablished predictor of effective secondary transition outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2021), a critical need exists to re-envision transition planning practices in ways that move beyond procedural compliance and toward culturally responsive, relationship-centered approaches that honor

Indigenous families as essential partners in the transition process.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question that provided direction and continued focus during the study was: How do families conceptualize their involvement in the special education postsecondary transition planning and their relationalities with the public schools? The families' experiences and perspectives were examined to identify (a) involvement and responsibilities regarding the transition planning process; (b) relationships with the school and if cultural values are respected, and (c) unique barriers or positive aspects to their involvement and relationalities with the school.

**Methodological Stance**

This study is situated within a qualitative phenomenological framework that seeks to understand and interpret the lived experiences of Indigenous families of students with disabilities as they engage in postsecondary transition planning. Phenomenology is particularly well suited to this inquiry because it prioritizes participants' meaning-making, perspectives, and interpretations of their experiences. However, because this study centers Indigenous families and communities, phenomenology is intentionally complemented by Indigenous relational research methodologies that emphasize relationship, accountability, and respect as foundational to knowledge production (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008; Wildcat & Voth, 2023).

Indigenous relational methodologies challenge extractive research traditions and instead position knowledge as relational—created in connection with people, land, culture, and community. Wilson (2008) asserts that research is ceremony, requiring ethical responsibility to relationships rather than mere adherence to procedural rigor. Similarly, Kovach (2009) argues that Indigenous research must honor Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing by centering story, relational accountability, and community relevance. Wildcat and Voth (2023) further describe relational approaches as balancing attention to local and regional contexts with broader shared Indigenous understandings of relationships. Together, these perspectives inform this study's methodological stance by framing research as a relational process rather than an extractive one.

This relational stance is particularly important given the historical and ongoing mistreatment of Indigenous communities by non-Native researchers who have entered communities to collect data without accountability or reciprocity. In response to these harms, scholars emphasize that research involving Indigenous peoples should be grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and conducted using culturally responsive and respectful approaches (Byrd, 2021; Wallerstein et al., 2019). This study was intentionally designed to resist deficitbased narratives and to honor Indigenous families as knowledge holders whose stories offer critical insight into educational systems and transition planning practices.

Storytelling is a central methodological practice within many Indigenous traditions and serves as both a cultural and methodological approach in this study. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were invited to share their stories and reflections about their experiences with transition planning. These narrative accounts were treated not simply as data points but as relational expressions rooted in family, culture, and lived experience. This approach aligns with

Indigenous methodologies that recognize storytelling as a valid and powerful way of knowing and transmitting knowledge (Kovach, 2009).

The methodological stance of this study is also informed by Indigenous understandings of family and kinship, which differ from dominant Western notions of the nuclear family. Indigenous family structures are often collective and intergenerational, with extended family members playing integral roles in children's upbringing, education, and decision-making (Beach, 2015; Chavez et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2010). Respect for elders and reciprocal relationships between generations are foundational cultural values that shape how families engage with schools and advocate for their children (Beach, 2015; Robins et al., 2013). Recognizing these relational dynamics was essential to understanding participants' experiences with transition planning, which often extend beyond parent-school interactions to include broader familial and community considerations.

Grounded in these relational principles, this study seeks not only to document Indigenous families' experiences but also to honor the relationships that make those experiences meaningful. By integrating phenomenology with Indigenous relational methodologies, the study aims to generate knowledge that is ethically grounded, culturally responsive, and accountable to the families and communities whose stories are shared.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis, making ongoing reflexivity essential. Reflexivity requires sustained attention to how personal beliefs, identities, and lived experiences shape the research process and interpretation of findings. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note, explicitly articulating researcher positionality strengthens credibility and trustworthiness by making the interpretive lens visible. Indigenous research methodologies further emphasize the importance of self-location, as

identifying one's relationships, responsibilities, and worldview clarifies how knowledge is approached and produced (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Central to my reflexive stance is the value of *humility*, a foundational principle within many Indigenous worldviews. Native humility is not a weakness but a strength. A strength that prioritizes relational accountability, trust, and respect. My research approach intentionally centers humility as a means of building and sustaining trust with participants. Humility is vital for facilitating meaningful communication within and across marginalized communities and for countering extractive or hierarchical research practices. When researchers fail to engage with cultural humility, they risk reinforcing power imbalances, harming community relationships, and perpetuating historical mistrust. Acknowledging this risk, I approach this study with a commitment to authentically representing participants' perspectives and ensuring that the findings reflect their lived experiences rather than my assumptions.

In alignment with Indigenous teachings that emphasize community over entitlement, this study seeks to shift traditional research power dynamics by honoring participants as knowledge holders and leaders in the research process. Rather than positioning myself as the primary authority, I intentionally adopt a relational stance rooted in reciprocity by taking only what is shared and leaving the rest. This perspective reinforces my commitment to ethical engagement, co-construction of knowledge and respect for community boundaries throughout the research process.

My positionality as an Indigenous woman with a disability and professional experience in special education further informs this work. As a former student receiving special education services and a special education teacher involved in secondary transition planning, I bring an insider perspective that deepens my awareness of both systemic challenges and cultural nuances experienced by Indigenous families of students with disabilities. This positionality allows me to

approach interviews with empathy and cultural sensitivity while remaining attentive to issues of access, support services, disability identity, and family expectations. At the same time, I remain critically reflexive about how my experiences shape data interpretation, intentionally grounding analysis in participants' voices and shared meanings (Haas, 2019).

Through this reflexive practice, I aim to conduct research that is relationally accountable, culturally grounded, and ethically responsible, and that contributes knowledge while honoring the communities at its center.

**Setting**

This study takes place in Oklahoma, a context that is uniquely situated for examining Indigenous family experiences in postsecondary transition planning. Oklahoma is home to 39 Tribal Nations, and over 70% of the state's public school districts operate within Tribal boundaries (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2024). More than 150,000 Native American students are enrolled in Oklahoma public schools, representing approximately 15% of the total student population—one of the highest proportions in the United States. During the 2024–2025 school year, over 400 Title VI Indian Education programs were operating statewide, further underscoring Oklahoma's substantial Indigenous educational infrastructure.

Approximately 17% of Oklahoma students receive special education services, slightly above the national average (NCES, 2022). Unlike national trends that demonstrate significant disproportionality between American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) student enrollment and special education participation, Oklahoma's data reflect a more proportional alignment, with Native students comprising 15% of total enrollment and 12.5% of students receiving special education services (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2024). Additionally, 94% of parents responding to the state survey reported that schools facilitated parent involvement to improve services and outcomes for students with disabilities. Collectively, these factors suggest

that many Indigenous families in Oklahoma have had direct experience with transition planning processes and are well positioned to contribute insight into these practices (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2022).

Participants were recruited from rural public schools located in central and east-central Oklahoma, regions that serve high-density Indigenous student populations and represent multiple Tribal Nations. These rural school contexts also reflect the intersection of Indigenous identity, disability services, and geographic considerations that are central to the focus of this study.

**Participants**

Following approval from the University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (IRB), participant recruitment began (see Appendix A for IRB documentation). Because this study focuses specifically on the experiences of Indigenous family members of students with disabilities (SWD) in secondary transition planning, purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016) was used to identify participants who met the following inclusion criteria:

(1) The parent or family representative of a child who

- self-identifies as Indigenous,
- qualifies for special education and related services under IDEA (2004),
- is of transition age (14-21),
- is currently attending or has recently graduated from an Oklahoma public school.

Purposeful sampling was selected because it allows the researcher to intentionally identify individuals who can provide information-rich accounts relevant to the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach supported the recruitment of an adequate sample size (minimum of five parent or family participants) sufficient to explore patterns and themes within participant experiences (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In addition, snowball sampling was employed

to identify participants through referrals, a strategy that is particularly effective for reaching individuals with shared or collective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Noy, 2008).

Recruitment assistance was provided by special education teachers, local parent organizations (i.e., Johnson O'Malley [JOM] and Title VI Indian Education programs), and community and Tribal agencies. These entities shared information about the study and researcher contact details with potential participants. Recruitment efforts explicitly emphasized respect for families, relational trust, and cultural values.

Once potential participants were identified, the researcher contacted individuals directly via email or telephone to schedule an initial meeting. During this meeting, the researcher introduced the study, explained its purpose and procedures, reviewed the informed consent process, and coordinated interview sessions. As a gesture of appreciation for their time and knowledge, participants received a $60 gift card.

Five participants who met all inclusion criteria consented to participate in the study. Participant demographic information is presented in Table 1. In accordance with IRB approval and to protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and referenced students.

Table 1.

*Participant Demographics*

| Participant | Relation to Student | Gender | Age Range | Tribal Affiliation | Household Composition |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Minnie | Mother | Female | 40-45 | Muscogee Creek | Extended |
| Lillian | Mother | Female | 50-55 | Seminole/Muscogee | Nuclear |
| Roberta | Mother | Female | 50-55 | Muscogee Creek | Nuclear |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ramona | Mother | Female | 40-45 | Muscogee/Seminole | Nuclear |
| Margo-Lavon | Mother | Female | 40-45 | Muscogee/Choctaw | Extended |

## Procedures

I completed semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences with secondary transition planning. Semi-structured interviews are less formal than fully structured formats because they rely on a set of guiding questions rather than predetermined responses, which can create a more comfortable and conversational environment for participants (Rusin et al., 2022). The semi-structured format allows flexibility for participants to interpret and respond to questions within the context of their lived experiences, while the open-ended inquiry approach enabling the interviewer to ask clarifying or follow-up questions as new insights emerge (Cresswell & Creswell, 2018).

As an Indigenous researcher, it was essential for me to approach both the research topic and participants in ways that center respect, relational accountability, and reciprocity (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). The interview protocol was informed by relational research methodology, which seeks balance between local contexts and Indigenous peoples shared understandings of relationships (Wildcat & Voth, 2023). Guided by this framework, the protocol was developed to center participants lived experiences while honoring relationality and culturally grounded ways of knowing. Prior to data collection, the interview protocol underwent thorough review and feedback by my dissertation committee and scholar cohort, to ensure the interview protocol was clearly aligned with the research questions and that they were culturally appropriate. The complete interview protocol is provided in Appendix B.

Each interview began with my sharing of personal positioning, including my experiences as a Native student with a learning disability, a Native college student with a disability, and a Native special education teacher who has developed transition plans for students with disabilities. This self-location established my relationship to the research and fostered connection through shared experiences in special education, and Indigenous identity in Oklahoma. Participants were then invited to share their experiences through a series of interview questions, which were organized into four thematic sections. The first section asked general demographic questions like, "Can you tell me about yourself? For example, your educational background?".

The second section focused on general experiences and perceptions related to special education. One example question from section 2 focused on IEP meetings, "Did you attend the last IEP meeting?" Potential follow-up questions based on participant responses included "If so, how did the schools involve you?" and "If you did not attend, why not?". The third section of questions were specifically about postsecondary transition planning and included questions like "What do you know about the transition services part of the IEP?" Another question from this section asked parents about their hopes and dreams for their students' futures. The final section asked parents to reflect on their experiences and share advice to other Native families of SWD navigating the transition planning process. Parents were also asked to share suggestions for teachers and administrators who work with Native students with disabilities in the transition planning process. Participants were also given the opportunity to add any thoughts or comments not addressed by the interview questions. See Appendix B.

**Data Collection**

Data collection took place through five one-on-one interviews that ranged from 25 minutes to 40 minutes. The participants were able to choose the modality of the interview that best fit their needs. Options included in-person, Zoom, or via phone. Four parents choose to meet

via Zoom and 1 elected to interview via phone due to broadband access. After obtaining participants' informed consent to record, interviews were audio recorded using the university's secure Zoom recording feature for virtual interviews and the iPhone call-recording feature for interviews conducted by telephone. Recording interviews for subsequent review during analysis supports data fidelity and enhances ethical rigor (De La Paz & Butler, 2018). During each interview, the researcher recorded field notes to document emerging ideas and observations relevant to the analysis.

After each interview was completed, the audio recording was transcribed using the secure, online transcription service, Rev. Participants were emailed a transcript of their interview and given the opportunity to add or clarify any of their responses, or to remove any information they no longer felt comfortable sharing. Recordings, transcripts, and consent documents were stored on a secure online server maintained by the university, in accordance with IRB approval.

**Data Analysis**

Cultural influences play a critical role in qualitative data analysis, particularly in studies that seek to understand lived experiences within Indigenous contexts. Trainor (2010) emphasizes that researchers must remain attentive to how cultural perspectives shape meaning-making during thematic analysis. Similarly, Harjo (2021) notes that culture, family, schooling, and community deeply influence the stories individuals tell, the ways they interpret experiences, and how they navigate the world. These perspectives informed the analytic approach used in this study and guided attention to relational, cultural, and contextual dimensions of participants' narratives.

Following participant review and approval of interview transcripts, the researcher and a second graduate student in special education conducted a thematic analysis of the data using the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The second graduate student was used for interrater reliability checks. First, both analysts independently read through all transcripts

multiple times to become familiar with the data and to gain an overall sense of participants' experiences. Next, transcripts were independently open coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software, allowing for the identification of meaningful units of data related to transition planning experiences, relationships with schools, and cultural considerations.

After completing initial coding, the analysts met to compare codes, discuss interpretations, and identify patterns across transcripts. Through this collaborative process, codes were refined, and preliminary themes were developed. The researchers then returned to the original transcripts to review, define, and further refine these themes, ensuring they were grounded in participant narratives and accurately represented shared experiences. Relevant interview excerpts were organized under each theme to support analytic coherence and transparency

Four primary themes emerged from parents' experiences (1) *Cultural Identity as a Strength*, (2) *Parent Advocacy and Collaboration*, (3) *Communication and Accountability*, and (4) *Strong Aspirations, Weak Transition Support*. These themes reflect both the resilience of Indigenous families and the systemic challenges they encounter in secondary transition planning. A detailed discussion of each theme, supported by representative participant quotations, is presented in Chapter 4.

**Trustworthiness**

Establishing trustworthiness is essential to ensuring rigor and credibility and serves as an analogue to validity in quantitative research. Trustworthiness reflects the extent to which a study's findings accurately represent participants' experiences and are grounded in ethical and methodologically sound practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, multiple strategies were intentionally employed.

The researcher prioritized reflexivity and transparency by explicitly acknowledging positionality and potential sources of bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This included sharing the researcher's relationship to the work as a Native researcher and disclosing lived experiences within special education as a student, teacher, and researcher. These experiences informed my approach to data interpretation and thematic analysis, particularly in recognizing relational, cultural, and contextual nuances within participants' narratives. Rather than seeking neutrality, I embraced relational accountability by situating analysis within shared experiences while remaining attentive to participants' distinct voices and perspectives.

Additionally, an ethical compliance checklist, adapted from Creswell and Poth (2016), was used to guide research procedures and support ethical decision-making throughout the study. Finally, member checking was completed by providing participants with the opportunity to review their interview transcripts, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of their recorded experiences and clarify or amend their statements as needed.

# CHAPTER 4: Findings

I explored the lived experiences of Native parents of students with disabilities (SWD) as they navigate the postsecondary transition planning process within Oklahoma public schools. This chapter presents the thematic findings derived from in-depth qualitative interviews with Native American families of high school students receiving special education services. Grounded in participants' narratives, the findings illuminate how Indigenous families experience, interpret, and respond to transition planning practices across culturally and geographically situated contexts.

The study included five female participants from predominantly American Indian households residing in central and east-central Oklahoma. Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants who could offer rich, reflective accounts of their personal, cultural, and relational experiences with transition planning. Each participant brought a distinct perspective shaped by her cultural heritage, family structure, professional background, and interactions with educational systems. Participants represented a range of occupations and community roles, contributing to a diverse yet interconnected set of insights relevant to the study's focus.

This diversity in location, profession, and household dynamics allowed for a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of parents' and guardians' experiences with postsecondary transition planning. Although each family's story was unique, shared patterns emerged across participants' narratives, revealing collective strengths as well as systemic challenges faced by Indigenous families navigating the transition planning process in Oklahoma public schools. The sections that follow present each theme in detail, supported by participants' stories and illustrative excerpts.

## Participant Experiences

Participants shared their experiences through a series of interview questions organized into four sections. The first section asked general demographic questions. The second section

focused on general experiences and perceptions related to special education. The third section of questions were specifically about postsecondary transition planning. The final section asked parents to reflect on their experiences and share advice to other Native families of SWD navigating the transition planning process along with suggestions for teachers and administrators who work with Native students with disabilities in the transition planning process. Thematic analysis of the interview responses provided by the participants resulted in four distinct themes (1) *Cultural Identity as a Strength*, (2) *Parent Advocacy and Collaboration*, (3) *Communication and Accountability*, and (4) *Strong Aspirations, Weak Transition Support*. Together, these themes reflect the resilience, advocacy, and high aspirations held by Indigenous families alongside persistent gaps in communication, collaboration, and culturally responsive transition planning. Table 3 displays cross participant summaries for each theme.

**Participant Profiles**

**Participant 1: Minnie.** The first interview took place on the Zoom platform and lasted approximately 27 minutes. The virtual format allowed flexibility in scheduling and created a comfortable environment for the participant to share their experiences in detail. The session was audio recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Minnie (pseudonym) is an American Indian parent living with her partner and daughter in a small rural community. Her daughter is a high-school-aged and receives special education services and has an IEP including a transition plan. She describes the community as highly populated with the American Indian population, and she works for the Muscogee Creek Nation Tribal Community. The mother's educational values are rooted in both cultural strength and academic persistence. She describes herself as a proactive advocate for her daughter's future, balancing cultural teachings with the realities of disability and transition planning.

**Participant 2: Lillian.** The second interview took place on the Zoom platform and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The virtual format allowed flexibility in scheduling and created a comfortable environment for the participant to share their experiences in detail. The session was audio recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Lillian (pseudonym) is an American Indian mother who has worked for the federal government and is well-versed in policy, paperwork, and advocacy systems. She resides with her two young adult sons in a rural area that is highly populated with American Indian families. Her youngest adult son received special education services for reading, math, and speech delays throughout elementary and middle school.

Her professional experience has given her a strong sense of how educational systems should function, which she often contrasts with her own experiences as a parent. Her son, now older, benefited from her proactive advocacy but also faced the challenge of adapting to changing expectations as he moved into general education classes. Lillian balanced her cultural values with the realities of working through systems that affect her child's educational opportunities. Her story represents an informed, persistent parent who fought to ensure her child was not underestimated or overlooked in school despite inconsistent school communication and limited transition planning.

**Participant 3: Roberta.** The third interview took place on phone due to family access to internet and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The format allowed flexibility in scheduling and created a comfortable environment for the participant to share their experiences in detail. The session was audio recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Roberta (pseudonym) is an American Indian mother residing with her husband and three young adult children in rural, Oklahoma, where she helps run the family plumbing business with

her husband. Her son, Tom (pseudonym), is profoundly disabled, nonverbal, and experiences seizures, which require intensive medical and educational coordination.

The family's home life revolves around ensuring Tom's safety, comfort, and sense of belonging. Roberta emphasized the importance of her Native identity and community, noting that cultural values of care, patience, and inclusion influence how she raises her son and interacts with school staff. Her daily life includes balancing her work, caregiving duties, and participation in her son's educational program. Unlike some of the participants, Roberta described positive, ongoing collaboration with teachers and administrators who communicate regularly and treat her as a valued team member. Her narrative emphasizes that when schools approach families with respect and openness, partnerships can thrive, even in complex special education situations.

**Participant 4: Ramona.** The fourth interview took place on the Zoom platform and lasted approximately 35 minutes. The virtual format allowed flexibility in scheduling and created a comfortable environment for the participant to share their experiences in detail. The session was audio recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ramona (pseudonym) is a Native mother of two children with disabilities; a daughter who is Deaf and a son diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Ramona and her young adult children reside in a small rural community with a modest population and that includes many American Indian families who share close cultural and familial ties. This is central to her parenting. She is a mother who has raised two children who both received special education services. Ramona has faced multiple challenges navigating the school system, especially when her daughter's hearing loss went undiagnosed until age five and her son was prematurely medicated without comprehensive evaluation. These experiences have made her both cautious and outspoken in advocating for her children's rights. Ramona relies heavily on her extended

family and community support networks, drawing strength from shared cultural values that emphasize endurance and relational care.

Ramona's narrative conveyed both frustration with institutional gaps and an unwavering belief in her children's ability to thrive when properly supported. She represents the many Native families who must simultaneously educate themselves and the school system about equitable and culturally aware support practices.

**Participant 5: Margo-Lavon.** The fifth and final interview took place on the Zoom platform and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The virtual format allowed flexibility in scheduling and created a comfortable environment for the participants to share their experiences in detail. The session was audio recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Lavon (pseudonym) is an American Indian mother who lives in a small rural community with her husband and their young adult children. Her son, Tim, received special education services throughout his secondary school years. Her children's educational journeys provided her with a long-term perspective on how special education and transition services have evolved—or, at times, failed to evolve—over the years.

Margo-Lavon's background includes steady employment and active involvement in tribal community programs, reflecting her belief in service and family unity. Her and husband approached education as a partnership between home, community, and school, though she recalled that the burden of coordination often fell on parents rather than educators. Her reflections blend cultural pride, work ethic, and a belief in self-determination, stating that her children's success came "from what they learned at home first." Her account provides a multigenerational perspective that reinforces how American families carry forward traditions of perseverance, advocacy, and hope despite systemic barriers.

## Thematic Analysis Across Participants

**Theme 1: Cultural Identity as Strength Definition**. Families' American Indian identity, traditions, and values gave them strength and guidance as they supported their children in school. Their culture helped them stay positive, proud, and resilient, even when facing challenges in special education. The cultural identity and family heritage were deeply intertwined with how all five participants understood and approached their roles as parents of children with disabilities. For each family, being American Indian was more than just part of who they are—it was a main source of strength and guidance. Their cultural teachings shaped values, like patience, persistence, and dignity, which parents used when speaking up for their children and working with schools.

Minnie described her family's daily life as grounded in cultural teachings and community connections. She emphasized that her daughter's involvement in traditional practices shapes her strength and identity, sharing that "my student child, she's very involved in her cultural ways…that always comes first that's how she's been taught". These values guide how the family interprets challenges and achievements in school. For Minnie, culture acts as a form of resilience, teaching her daughter humility, perseverance, and confidence. She expressed pride in teaching her child to embrace both her identity and her capabilities, stating, "I was always taught to be a strong Este Cate Hokte (Native woman), so that's what I teach her too. Just because disabilities come along don't make you think that you have to be weak." Minnie words highlight the role of cultural strength as a consistent protective factor, offering identity and self-worth even when formal systems fail to provide holistic support.

Lilian echoed similar ideas, explaining that her family's participation in tribal community events and ceremonies kept her son connected to their culture and grounded his sense of selfworth. Roberta noted that her family's cultural identity was part of their everyday life, even

though her son's profound disabilities limited his participation in larger gatherings. She shared, "Everyone in our family household is Native American and enrolled. We try to do the most we can culturally… as much as possible we do."

Ramona explained that her cultural upbringing taught her patience and persistence, both of which became crucial when she fought for appropriate diagnoses and services for her children. Margo-Lavon reflected on how cultural lessons of hard work, humility, and service to others guided her parenting and expectations: "We were always told to work hard and be proud of who you are. That's what I told my kids too."

Collectively, the stories shared by participants show that culture gives families strength and support during tough times in school. Each of the parents in the current study found courage and guidance in the lessons passed down from their families and from feeling connected to their community. For them, cultural identity wasn't something extra, it was a key source of motivation and resilience.

**Theme 2: Parents Advocacy in Collaboration**

Parents worked hard to stand up for their children's needs, often having to push schools to provide proper help. Although they were strong advocates, IEP meetings were sometimes repetitive and lacked real collaboration or new solutions. Each parent saw advocacy as essential, though their experiences with IEP processes varied widely.

Minnie demonstrated persistent involvement in IEP meetings but expressed fatigue from repetitive, unproductive discussions. She explained, "It was basically the same thing they tell me every year." Her experience reveals the emotional toll of advocating within rigid systems that fail to evolve with student needs. Lillian reflected a more positive experience, describing teachers who valued her voice. She stated, "Anything that I want to be put in the IEP… they make sure and put it in there." Her collaboration with educators exemplifies how trust and respect foster

meaningful advocacy outcomes. Roberta reported similarly strong engagement with school staff: "They always check in with me and keep me updated." Regular communication reinforced her confidence in the process, showing the benefits of consistent partnership. Ramona emphasized inclusion despite challenges, explaining, "I always went to the IEP. If I couldn't go in person, they did it over the phone so I was included." Her commitment demonstrates resilience and adaptability but also underscores how accessibility barriers persist for many Native families. Margo-Lavon illustrated ongoing struggles to maintain accountability, stating, "I have to remind them sometimes what we talked about before." Her account shows that parents often must act as monitors of follow-through rather than true collaborators.

Collectively, these accounts show that family advocacy is strong, but school support is inconsistent and often relies on parental persistence rather than systematic follow-through. Though Minnie viewed herself as an active participant in her daughter's education, she experienced frustration with the repetitive nature of IEP meetings. She described feeling disengaged after years of hearing the same updates, saying, "it was just basically the same thing they tell me every year."

Her decision not to attend the most recent meeting reflects the larger pattern of procedural compliance without meaningful family input. Still, she remained deeply committed to her daughter's progress, supporting her learning and encouraging self-discipline at home. Minnie's narrative demonstrates that many Native families continue to advocate strongly, even when institutional processes become discouraging or formulaic. Her story reflects both persistence and fatigue, the sense that families must push for more authentic collaboration and recognition in IEP planning.

**Theme 3: Communication & Accountability**

The families shared that communication with schools was not always consistent or clear. Some teachers were helpful and kept in touch, while others rarely followed up or explained things, making it hard for parents to stay informed. Minnie described inconsistent teacher communication, saying, “Some teachers understand, but some know she has an IEP and still leave her on her own.” This highlights how inconsistent classroom practices undermine inclusion and trust. Lillian observed similar inconsistency, sharing, “Some teachers don’t follow through like others.” Even within supportive schools, she noticed that engagement varied depending on individual teacher effort rather than a coordinated system.

Roberta experienced positive communication practices that strengthened collaboration: “Anytime that I need, I can text or call up there. They’re very open to anything that’s needed.” Her case demonstrates how simple, consistent communication can build trust and reduce family stress. Ramona faced one of the most serious breakdowns in communication when her daughter was denied an interpreter: “They thought she could just be in special ed, but she needed someone to sign. Without that, she couldn’t communicate.” This situation exposed both procedural neglect and cultural insensitivity. Margo-Lavon felt excluded from key updates, stating, “They say they’ll call, but they don’t. I feel left out of what’s really happening.” Her experience illustrates how communication lapses deepen the divide between families and schools, eroding confidence in the process. These patterns show unfair systems where good communication depends on the teacher’s effort rather than the school’s policies.

**Theme 4: Strong Aspirations, Weak Transition Support**

Parents aspired for their children’s futures but received little guidance from schools about how to plan for life after high school. The families often took the lead in preparing their children for independence and success on their own. Minnie expressed high hopes for her daughter’s

independence: “I want her to finish school and live on her own.” Despite this, she received minimal transition support from the school, leaving her to guide her daughter largely alone. Lillian envisioned her son balancing independence and family ties, stating, “I want him to find steady work and stay close to family.” Her goals reflected both economic stability and cultural continuity, though she too noted limited guidance from educators. Roberta aspired for her son’s continued education: “I want him to keep learning and maybe go to college.” She remained optimistic about his potential, yet her narrative suggested that proactive transition planning was driven more by her family than by school initiatives. Ramona expressed disappointment at the lack of direction following high school: “I just wanted someone to explain what comes next after graduation, but no one did.” Her experience exemplified the gap between family expectations and knowledges about transition resources. Margo-Lavon described success in holistic terms: “I just want him to have a good life and be part of the community.” For her, transition success included belonging, identity, and participation in tribal life, reflecting values often overlooked in Western educational frameworks.

Across cases, aspirations were culturally grounded and optimistic, yet transition planning remained procedural and detached from family and community values. The absence of consistent transition supports forced families to rely on their own cultural knowledge, community networks, and resilience to fill the gaps left by formal systems.

**Summary of Themes**

Across participants, all four themes revealed a balance of resilience and systemic constraint. Families consistently showed strong advocacy and culturally rooted hope for their children, yet they met persistent communication gaps, uneven school responsiveness, and inadequate transition collaboration. Their stories affirm that Indigenous families bring extensive cultural knowledge, kinship strength, and determination to special education processes—

qualities that, if honored through culturally responsive practices, could significantly improve transition outcomes for American Indian students with disabilities.

**Reflection Questions**

At the conclusion of each interview, parents were asked to reflect on their experiences and share any advice they would give to other Native families with students who have a disability and are navigating the transition planning process. They were also asked to offer suggestions to teachers and administrators who work with Native students on their IEP postsecondary transition planning in high school. These responses are short but very powerful because they show how parents translate their lived experiences into best practices guidance. Figure 1 displayed advice from each participant and Figure 2 shows participants' suggestions to teachers and administrators.

The participants' follow-up responses reflected two clear themes: families emphasized self-advocacy, persistence, and cultural strength, while urging educators to communicate clearly and show respect for Native values. These reflections highlight that effective transition planning depends on empowered families and culturally responsive, relationship-centered schools working together.

**Reflection Question Analysis**

Responses revealed two clear themes: (1) Family Empowerment and Self-Advocacy; and (2) School Accountability and Relationship Building. Comparative analysis shows that from the families' perspective, self-advocacy, persistence, and preparation are seen as the keys to navigating the system. Analysis also identified clearer communication, better resource provision, and authentic collaboration with parents and key responsibilities of schools. Across the interviews, families stressed self-advocacy and preparation while urging schools to strengthen communication, resources, and collaboration, showing that meaningful transition planning

requires both empowered families and supportive schools. Table 3 presents a summary of themes from the reflection questions.

*Figure 1.*

*Participant's Responses to Reflection Question 1.*

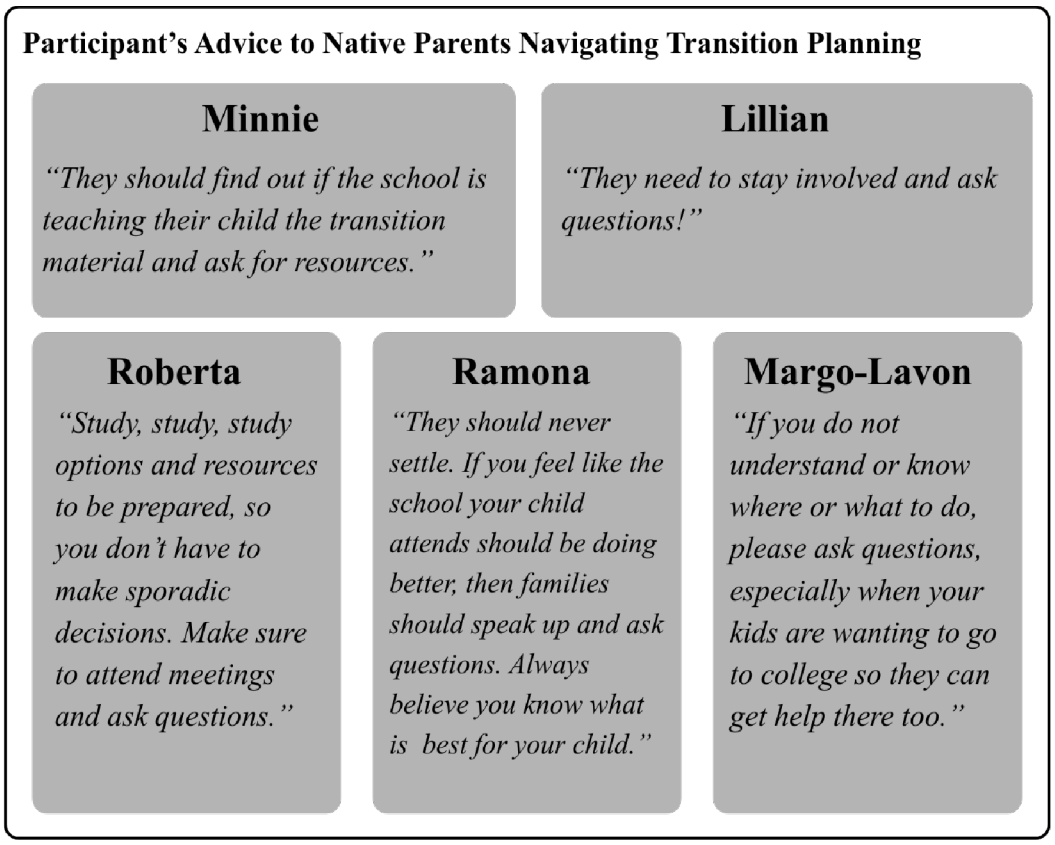


*Figure 2*

*Participant's Responses to Reflection Question 2.*

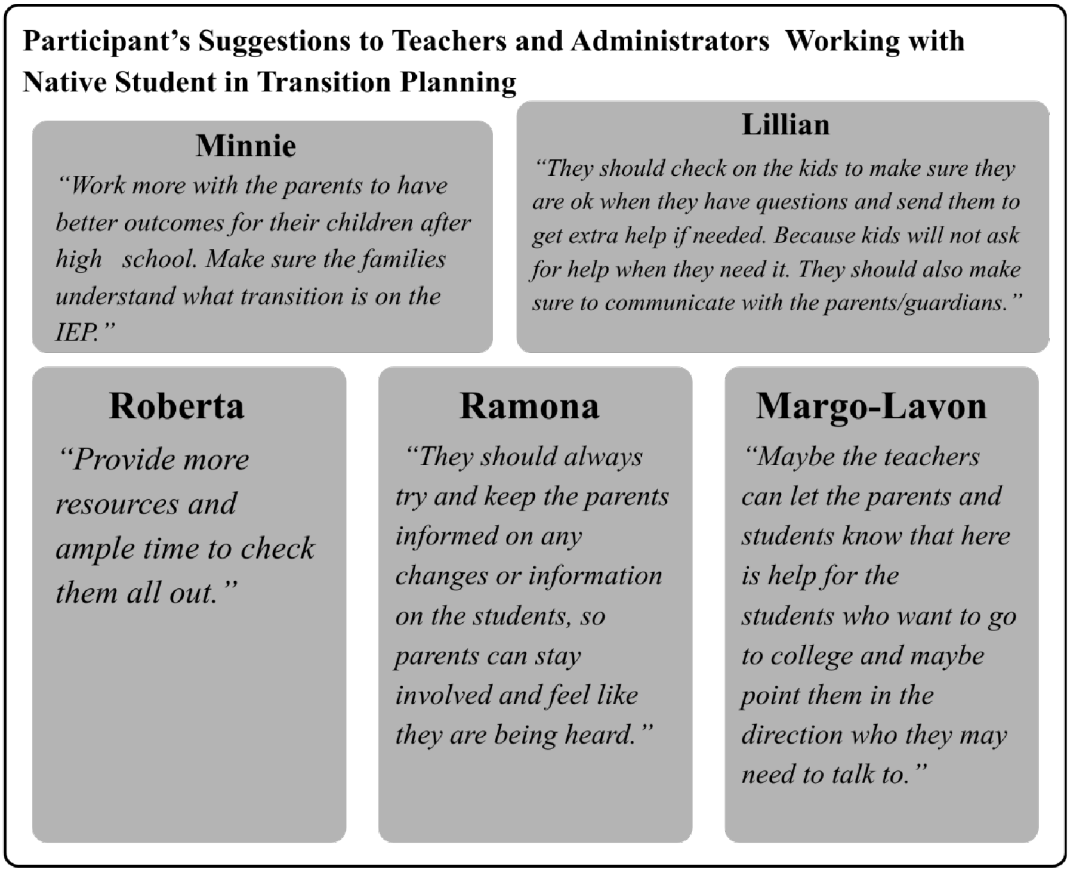



Table 2.

*Cross Participant Summary of Reflection Question Themes with Representative Quotes*

| Participant | Theme 1: Family Empowerment and Self-Advocacy | Representative Quote | Theme 2: School Relationship Accountability and Building | Representative Quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Minnie | Emphasized persistence and staying active in all meetings. | “Keep pushing and don’t give up.” | Urged schools to value parent input in decision-making. | “Take time to understand each student’s needs and communicate clearly with parents.” |
| Lillian | Highlighted the need for informed advocacy. | “Study what’s out there so you know what services your child can get.” | Called for clarity and follow-up communication. | “Make sure families understand what’s in the IEP and what happens after graduation.” |
| Roberta | Encouraged proactive family participation | “Get involved early and don’t wait for the school to call you.” | Praised open, ongoing communication between teachers and parents. | “Communicate often and make families feel included.” |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ramona | Stressed confidence and persistence. | "If you don't know something, ask—don't be afraid to speak up." | Advocated for accessible and respectful communication. | "Explain things in plain language and don't rush through meetings." |
| Margo-Lavon | Emphasized persistence and courage in advocacy. | "Stand your ground and always fight for your child." | Called for increased cultural awareness. | "Schools should learn about our traditions and be more respectful of Native families." |

**Theme 1: Family Empowerment and Self-Advocacy**

Across all participants, parents emphasized the importance of family involvement, persistence, and self-advocacy. They described empowerment as staying informed, asking questions, and refusing to "settle" when schools fail to provide adequate support. Minnie encouraged parents to "Keep pushing and don't give up." While Lillian stressed the importance of "Studying what's out there" so families understand their rights. Roberta echoed this sentiment, advising families to "Get involved early and don't wait for the school to call you." Ramona highlighted perseverance and awareness, saying,

"If you don't know something, ask—don't be afraid to speak up." Similarly, Margo-Lavon reflected on the strength of persistence, advising other parents to "stand your ground and always fight for your child."

These responses show that families viewed advocacy not just as a task but as a cultural and moral responsibility grounded in love, resilience, and community values. Their advice reflected an understanding that navigating special education systems requires both knowledge and confidence, especially for Indigenous families who often face historical inequities and underrepresentation. Collectively, this theme highlights that family empowerment is essential to students' success in transition planning.

**Theme 2: School Accountability and Relationship Building**

When offering advice to educators and schools, parents consistently called for stronger communication, cultural respect, and genuine collaboration. They urged teachers to listen more deeply to families and to recognize that parents are experts on their children. Minnie advised schools to "include the parents more—they know their kids best." Lillian emphasized clarity and consistency: "Make sure families understand what's in the IEP and what happens after graduation." Roberta praised teachers who "communicate often and make you feel included," while Ramona urged schools to "explain things in plain language and not rush through meetings." Lavon advocated for empathy and cultural awareness: "Schools should learn about our traditions and be more respectful of Native families."

Together, these statements form a powerful call for culturally responsive and relationship-centered education. Parents viewed accountability not only as following policies but as building trust through respect, understanding, and transparency. This theme reinforces findings across the larger study showing families are deeply invested in their children's futures, yet school systems must become more culturally aware, consistent, and communicative to meet them halfway.

### Summary of Reflection Insights

Across both themes, families and schools were seen as partners with shared responsibility for successful transition planning. Families urged one another to be informed, persistent, and courageous, while at the same time calling on educators to be more communicative, inclusive, and culturally sensitive. Together, these follow-up themes reinforce the central findings of Chapter 4, which show that American Indian families navigate transition planning through advocacy, cultural resilience, and relational strength. Their advice shows that real progress in special education depends on schools valuing Native voices, building trust, and working with families as equal partners in decisions.

## Research Question Findings

This section presents findings for Research Question 1, which explored how families understand their involvement in special education transition planning and their relationships with public schools. The analysis highlights common patterns in how families described their roles, responsibilities, and experiences during the transition process. The themes that follow, family involvement, relationships with schools and cultural respect, and barriers and positive experiences, highlight the families' advocacy, cultural values, and the challenges they faced working with schools.

### RQ1: How do families conceptualize their involvement in special education postsecondary transition planning and the relationalities with the public schools?

The families conceptualize their involvement as active but unevenly supported. They see themselves as advocates and protectors of their children, often filling gaps left by the schools. Relationalities with schools are marked by inconsistency: some teachers and administrators fostered strong collaboration, while others overlooked cultural values and failed to communicate or offered minimal support.

**RQ1a: Families' perceptions of their involvement and responsibilities**

Parents saw attendance and advocacy at IEP meetings as central to their role Lillian and Roberta attended actively; Minnie sometimes skipped due to repetition; Ramona joined even by phone. Families felt responsible for asking questions, pushing for services, and staying informed, often framing this as "never settle" or "study resources". They felt parents had to fill in the gaps because schools didn't clearly explain transition planning.

The parents saw themselves as their child's main advocates in transition planning. They viewed attending IEP meetings, asking questions, and pushing for support as key responsibilities. Some parents, like Lillian and Ramona, were consistently involved, while others, like Minnie, participated less when meetings felt repetitive. Overall, families believed it was their job to speak up and make sure their child's needs were met, even if they didn't fully understand all parts of the transition process.

**RQ1b: Perceptions of relationships with schools and cultural respect**

Perceptions of relationships were mixed. Lillian and Roberta both reported open communication and partnership, while Minnie and Ramona described being left out or unsupported. Across all interviews, parents indicated that schools did not integrate cultural values into IEP or transition planning. Families maintained cultural identity at home and in the community (e.g., ceremonial grounds, resilience teachings), but these strengths were not acknowledged by schools.

The families had both positive and negative experiences with schools. Some, like Roberta, described open and helpful communication, while others, like Minnie and Ramona, felt unsupported or faced barriers such as the lack of interpreters. Many parents were frustrated that schools did not include or value their cultural traditions in IEPs or transition planning. Families

continued to teach cultural values and participate in community events on their own, but these strengths were not recognized by schools.

**RQ1c: Unique barriers and positive aspects of involvement/relationalities**

The families faced barriers such as late diagnoses, lack of interpreters, weak transition planning, poor communication, and little cultural inclusion. Positive experiences happened when schools offered interpreters, consistent communication, or life-skills programs that made families feel supported. Parents also saw their culture as a source of strength that helped their children build confidence and belonging, even when schools didn't recognize it.

Overall, the findings from parent interviews showed that families see their involvement as active advocacy guided by cultural values. However, their relationships with schools are often weakened by poor communication, limited understanding of transition planning, and little cultural inclusion. Even with these challenges, parents remain hopeful and use their cultural strength to support their children's transition. Consistent with existing research identifying family involvement as a key predictor of positive postschool outcomes for students with disabilities (Test, Mazzoti et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2021), the findings of this study demonstrate that Indigenous families hold strong aspirations and play active advocacy roles, even when formal transition planning processes fall short of supporting meaningful collaboration.

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to critically examine and center the lived experiences of Indigenous parents and families as they engaged in postsecondary transition planning within Oklahoma public schools. Specifically, the study sought to understand the extent to which Indigenous families perceived themselves to be valued, respected, and meaningfully included in transition planning processes that play a critical role in shaping post-school outcomes for Indigenous students with disabilities. Grounded in Indigenous relational methodologies, this study amplified family narratives to illuminate how transition planning is experienced within cultural, relational, and systemic contexts.

To address this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with Indigenous parents of students with disabilities who were currently navigating or had recently completed the secondary transition planning process. Through thematic analysis of participants' stories, four interconnected themes emerged: (a) cultural identity as strength; (b) parent advocacy and collaboration; (c) communication and accountability; and (d) strong aspirations, weak transition support. Together, these findings highlight the resilience, advocacy, and high aspirations Indigenous families bring to transition planning, alongside persistent challenges related to communication, collaboration, and culturally responsive practice within public school systems.

This chapter situates the study's findings within the broader literature on special education transition planning, family–professional collaboration, and Indigenous education. The discussion is guided by the primary research question: *How do Indigenous families conceptualize their involvement in special education postsecondary transition planning and their relationalities with public schools?* To further address this question, the discussion examines families' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities within the transition process; their experiences with school–family

relationships and the extent to which cultural values were acknowledged and respected; and the structural, cultural, and relational barriers and facilitators that shaped their engagement.

By revisiting the study's findings through these guiding questions, this chapter interprets how Indigenous parents understand and enact their involvement in transition planning and how relational dynamics with schools influence that involvement. In doing so, the discussion underscores the importance of family–professional alliances built on trust, mutual respect, shared responsibility, and cultural responsiveness, while also highlighting the need to move beyond compliance-driven models toward relational, community-grounded approaches to transition planning. The chapter concludes with implications for practice, policy, and future research aimed at strengthening meaningful family involvement and improving postsecondary outcomes for Indigenous students with disabilities.

**Summary of Findings**

Four primary themes emerged from parents' experiences: (a) Cultural identity as strength, (b) Parent advocacy and collaboration, (c) Communication and accountability, and (d) Strong aspirations, weak transition support. Collectively, these themes illustrate how families conceptualize their involvement and relationships with public schools.

Families described their involvement as rooted in cultural strength, responsibility, and persistence, drawing on Indigenous values to remain engaged even when the process felt unclear or exclusionary. Parents consistently viewed themselves as essential advocates in transition planning, often taking on this role independently when meetings lacked clarity or failed to meaningfully include family voices.

Relationally, families experienced varied and often inconsistent engagement from schools. While some educators communicated openly and followed through on commitments, others provided limited information, leaving parents uncertain about their child's transition planning. As

a result, families conceptualized their relationship with schools as uneven and heavily dependent on individual staff members rather than systematic collaboration.

Despite these challenges, parents expressed strong aspirations for their children's independence, inclusion, and life beyond high school. However, these aspirations were frequently unsupported by concrete guidance or coordinated transition planning from schools. Overall, the findings indicate that Indigenous families understand their involvement as active, relational, and future-oriented, yet they often must rely on their own cultural knowledge, advocacy skills, and persistence to navigate a system that does not consistently provide the collaboration, clarity, or accountability necessary for effective transition planning.

**Interpretating Themes Through a Relational Lens**

Findings indicated that Indigenous parents assign meaning to their experiences in postsecondary transition planning through a lens of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). From this standpoint, involvement is understood not merely as attendance at meetings or completion of required steps, but as a responsibility to relationships, including sustained effort, presence, and advocacy on behalf of their children. This lens helps contextualize parents' descriptions of exerting significant personal effort to support their students while perceiving limited reciprocal accountability from school personnel.

Although parents described strong and continued involvement, many expressed frustrations with what they experienced as a lack of follow-through, responsiveness, or relational commitment from some educators. One parent described becoming so discouraged by the repetitive and procedural nature of annual IEP meetings that she ultimately stopped attending. Rather than signaling disengagement, this decision can be interpreted as a relational response to processes that felt disconnected from meaningful collaboration.

Viewed through an Indigenous relational framework, these experiences reflect a tension between parents' expectations of relational accountability and school systems that often prioritize procedural compliance. While families emphasized trust, responsibility, and shared commitment, transition planning processes frequently appeared focused on meeting formal requirements rather than fostering reciprocal relationships. This disconnect may be shaped by broader structural factors, including an educational accountability system that emphasizes compliance with special education indicators while providing limited guidance or professional learning focused on culturally responsive engagement with Indigenous families. This misalignment between relational expectations and institutional practices was especially evident in families' discussions of postsecondary aspirations and transition supports.

Parents also described holding strong aspirations for their students with disabilities while feeling dissatisfied with the limited support provided by schools to help their children achieve these goals. Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates that parents be equal members of the IEP team with an active role in developing postsecondary transition goals and services, participants consistently reported that schools did not provide—or meaningfully connect students to—transition services and resources that reflected their families' aspirations. As a result, parents perceived transition planning as disconnected from their long-term visions for their children's futures.

This disconnect can be further understood through a relational and Indigenous lens. Achola and Greene (2016) highlight the importance of person- family-centered transition planning, which recognizes family values, collective goals, and shared responsibility in planning for adulthood. Such approaches are particularly relevant for Indigenous families, as many Indigenous cultures emphasize interdependence and collective well-being rather than prioritizing individual goals in isolation (Beach, 2015; Chavez et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2010). The

findings of this study suggest that when transition planning processes center individual compliance-driven outcomes without attending to family and cultural values, Indigenous families may experience their involvement as limited or misaligned. Meaningful involvement for Indigenous families, therefore, may look different from dominant models of family engagement and requires transition planning practices that honor collective aspirations and relational accountability.

Parents consistently described their cultural background and values as a significant source of strength for themselves and their students, a perspective that aligns with Wilson's (2008) concept of relational accountability. Within this framework, knowledge, responsibility, and action are grounded in relationships with family, community, and future generations. One parent shared that her son's close relationships with extended family members played a critical role in his successful completion of school, illustrating how kinship networks function as systems of support and accountability. Other parents explained that when schools did not provide information or resources related to transition planning, they turned to Tribal community members and agencies to obtain guidance for their students. These actions reflect relational accountability in practice, as families relied on reciprocal relationships rather than institutional systems alone. Parents further emphasized cultural teachings that promote resilience, collective responsibility, and sustained connection across generations, values that shaped how students understood and navigated their disabilities. Through this relational lens, disability was not
viewed as an individual limitation but as an experience situated within family responsibility, cultural identity, and shared relational obligations.

**Family Involvement and Positive Post-School Outcomes**

Consistent with long-standing evidence that family involvement predicts positive postschool outcomes for students with disabilities (Test, Mazzoti et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al.,

2016; 2021), this study illuminates how Indigenous families sustain strong aspirations and enact active advocacy on behalf of their children even when formal transition planning processes do not support meaningful collaboration. In doing so, the findings move beyond documenting whether families are involved to showing how families' commitment persists despite institutional conditions that constrain their participation—an extension that highlights agency alongside systemic limitation.

Parents in this study described barriers to collaborative transition planning that echo patterns reported among culturally and linguistically diverse families: strained family–school relationships, inconsistent or unidirectional communication, and the absence of culturally appropriate practices (Defur et al., 2001; Geenen et al., 2001; Rosetti et al., 2018; Zionts et al., 2003). At the same time, our phenomenological analysis suggests these barriers were experienced not merely as logistical gaps but as misalignments in values and expectations, a form of dissonance that required parents to navigate systems that did not readily recognize their cultural knowledge or preferred forms of engagement. This nuance deepens the CLD literature by specifying the qualities of misalignment that Indigenous families encounter in transition contexts.

Parents unanimously reported that their culture was not meaningfully included in planning for their students' postsecondary transition. This aligns closely with research indicating that cultural considerations are central, not peripheral, to effective transition planning for Indigenous students with disabilities (Tenell, 2024). The findings extend this work by illustrating the practical implications of cultural omission: when culture is absent from transition processes, families shoulder additional advocacy burdens and face narrowed pathways for collaboration, conditions that may limit the relevance and uptake of transition plans for students and communities.

Taken together, this study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it corroborates the well-established link between family involvement and positive outcomes (Test, Mazzotti et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2016; 2021) while foregrounding how Indigenous families sustain advocacy amid institutional shortfalls. Second, it refines CLD-focused findings (defur et al., 2001; Geenen et al., 2005; Rosetti et al., 2018; Zionts et al., 2003) by specifying the experiential contours of barrier-laden collaboration as reported by Indigenous parents. Third, it underscores the necessity of transition planning approaches that move beyond procedural compliance to relational, culturally grounded partnerships, aligning with calls for culturally responsive transition practices (Achola, 2019; Barrio, 2021; Tenell, 2024). Unlike prior transition research that often conceptualizes family involvement as a measurable behavior, this study reframes involvement as a relational and culturally situated practice shaped by Indigenous epistemologies and systemic constraints. By centering the lived experiences of Indigenous families, the study advances a view of "family involvement" as contingent upon cultural inclusion, reciprocal communication, and school-based practices that recognize family expertise as foundational rather than supplemental.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it centers the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous families of students with disabilities during the postsecondary transition planning process, an area that remains underrepresented in both special education and Indigenous education research. By foregrounding Indigenous parents' perspectives, this research addresses critical gaps in the literature related to culturally responsive transition planning, family engagement, and relational accountability within public school systems.

## Implications for Research

This study contributes to the literature by integrating phenomenology with Indigenous relational research methodologies, offering an approach that honors story, lived experience, and community knowledge as legitimate and necessary forms of evidence. Traditionally, research has often marginalized Indigenous narratives and relied heavily on Western frameworks to interpret experiences (Smith et al., 2017). Future studies should intentionally incorporate multiple Native voices and center Indigenous ways of knowing to ensure that interpretations accurately reflect cultural values, community strengths, and lived realities. While existing research on transition planning often emphasizes compliance, student outcomes, or professional perspectives, far fewer studies examine transition planning through the experiences of Indigenous families. By centering parents' narratives, this study expands understanding of how transition planning is experienced relationally, culturally, and systemically.

Additionally, this research challenges deficit-oriented narratives by highlighting Indigenous families' strengths, advocacy practices, and aspirations for their children. The findings reinforce the importance of culturally grounded inquiry and underscore the need for qualitative methodologies that respect Indigenous epistemologies and family structures.

## Implications for Practice

The findings have direct implications for special education practice, particularly for educators, transition coordinators, school administrators, and related service providers working with Indigenous students and families. By identifying barriers related to communication, collaboration, and accountability, as well as practices that foster trust and meaningful engagement his study provides insight into how schools can strengthen relationships with Indigenous families during transition planning. The findings from this study add further evidence to the importance of meaningful family involvement in transition planning, which has been consistently identified as a

predictor of positive postschool outcomes for students with disabilities (Test, Mazzotti et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2016; 2021). In particular, participants' experiences highlight how family engagement is most effective when it is relational, culturally responsive, and supported by clear communication and collaboration with school personnel, reinforcing the person-family centered transition planning model described by Achola & Greene (2016).

Educators and school systems may use the findings to reflect on their current transition practices and consider more culturally responsive, relationship-centered approaches that actively include families as equal partners. Emphasizing family aspirations, cultural identity, and relational trust can improve the quality and relevance of transition plans and better prepare Indigenous students for life beyond high school.

**Implications for Policy**

This study is significant in the context of state and federal accountability for secondary transition planning, particularly in light of ongoing challenges related to compliance with IDEA (2004) transition requirements. In Oklahoma, where Tribes play an active role in educational advocacy yet often operate alongside state systems, these findings highlight opportunities for more intentional collaboration between public schools and Tribal education departments By documenting Indigenous families' experiences, this research provides qualitative evidence that can inform policy discussions around family engagement, Indicator 13 implementation, and culturally responsive transition planning practices. The findings may support policymakers, state education agencies, and Tribal education departments in developing or refining policies that recognize Indigenous families as essential partners in transition planning rather than peripheral participants. This study also underscores the need for policy frameworks that move beyond procedural compliance toward relational and culturally sustaining approaches.

## Implications for Tribal Communities

Perhaps most importantly, this study is significant to Indigenous families and communities. By privileging Indigenous voices and honoring participants as knowledge holders, the research affirms community experiences and contributes to reclaiming narrative authority within education research. The study seeks not only to document challenges but also to uplift family resilience, advocacy, and hopes for their children's futures.

Grounded in Indigenous relational accountability, this research aspires to offer findings that are meaningful, respectful, and potentially useful to families, Tribal education programs, and community advocates working to improve transition outcomes for Indigenous students with disabilities. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing efforts toward educational equity, self-determination, and culturally responsive practice.

## Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, although Oklahoma is home to a large and diverse number of Tribal Nations, the focus on Indigenous families within a single state limits the transferability of the findings to Indigenous students with disabilities in other geographic or cultural contexts. Second, all study participants were mothers, which may restrict the range of family perspectives represented, particularly those of fathers, grandparents, or other caregivers who may play significant roles in transition planning for Indigenous students with disabilities. Finally, all participating students attended rural public schools; therefore, the experiences documented in this study may not reflect those of Indigenous families navigating transition planning in suburban or urban school settings. Despite these limitations, the findings offer important, context-specific insights into the experiences of Indigenous families engaged in secondary transition planning.

## Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine and center the lived experiences of Indigenous parents and families as they engaged in postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities within Oklahoma public schools. Grounded in phenomenology and Indigenous relational methodologies, the research sought to understand how families conceptualize their involvement, how they experience relationships with schools, and how cultural, relational, and structural factors shape their participation in transition planning. Through participants' stories, this study illuminated both the resilience Indigenous families bring to educational planning and the systemic conditions that often limit meaningful collaboration.

The findings affirm that Indigenous families hold strong aspirations for their children's futures. These aspirations are rooted in cultural values of responsibility, independence, community belonging, and collective success. Parents described themselves as deeply invested advocates who actively navigate complex systems in hopes of securing equitable opportunities for their children. Yet, despite these commitments, families frequently encountered transition planning processes characterized by limited guidance, inconsistent communication, and insufficient relational accountability. These experiences reveal a disconnect between families' visions for their children and the supports provided by schools to realize those visions.

Importantly, this study challenges deficit-based narratives that frame Indigenous families as disengaged or lacking capacity. Instead, the findings underscore that meaningful involvement is often constrained not by families' willingness or knowledge, but by educational practices that prioritize compliance over relationships. When schools failed to engage families as equal partners or to honor Indigenous ways of knowing, families were compelled to assume greater advocacy roles, often at personal and emotional cost. These insights highlight the need to re-envision

transition planning as a relational process grounded in trust, mutual respect, and cultural responsiveness.

By centering Indigenous parent voices, this study contributes to a growing body of research calling for educational approaches that move beyond procedural adherence toward relationship-centered practice. The findings reinforce existing literature identifying family involvement as a key predictor of positive postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities, while offering culturally grounded explanations of how and why such involvement matters. Moreover, this research affirms the value of Indigenous epistemologies and relational accountability in shaping ethical, meaningful educational inquiry.

In closing, this study serves as both an invitation and a responsibility—to educators, policymakers, researchers, and communities—to listen more closely to Indigenous families and to engage in transition planning practices that genuinely reflect shared responsibility. Honoring Indigenous families as knowledge holders and partners requires a shift not only in practice, but in perspective. It is through this shift that transition planning can become a process that supports not only compliance, but belonging, dignity, and possibility for Indigenous students with disabilities and their families.

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# APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

**Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects**

**Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01**

**Date:** January 13, 2025 **IRB#:** 17986

**Principal Investigator:** Brooki R Beasley

**Approval Date:** 01/13/2025

**Exempt Category: 2**

**Study Title:** Rotating the lens and seeing through our eyes: a qualitative study of storytelling of experiences of postsecondary transition planning

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: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**General Demographics**

(2) Please tell me about yourself and your student.

(3) Do you live in a highly populated native community?

(4) Is most of the household Native American? If so, how do your students engage with their Tribal communities?

**Experiences and Perceptions of SPED in General**

- What do you know about special education and individuals education's program? And what can you tell me about special education services and your child's? IEP?
- Did you attend the last IEP meeting? If so, how did the schools involve you? And if you did not attend, why not? How did you first learn about your child's disability, and what was your initial response?
- How their disability does it affect their daily lives?
- Can you describe your experience communicating with your child's teachers and school administrators regarding their disability?

**Transition Specific Experiences**

- What do you know about the transition specific part of the IEP? For example? Like federal laws that require that the students have the transition piece put in their high school IEP.
- Can you share your students postsecondary transition goals from?

- What are your hope and dreams for your students transition? For example, employment, independent living, community involvement, and involvement of their culture for each one.
- What are your student's hope and dreams after high school for themselves?
- In what ways did the school respect and consider your cultural values with consideration to transition planning?
- In what ways does your cultural background influence how you understand and support your child's disability and developing transition plans?

**Reflection Questions**

- What advice would you give to other Native families with students who have a disability who are navigating the transition planning process?
- What suggestions would you give to teachers, and administrators who work with students on their IEP postsecondary transition planning in high school