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Navigating the Transition from High School to Adulthood: Insights from Graduates with
Borderline Intellectual Functioning Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

in

Education Leadership

by

Tabitha Seaver

Committee in Charge:

University of California, San Diego

Professor Christoforos Mamas, Chair

California State University San Marcos

Professor Jodi Robledo

Professor Christiane Wood

2026

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University of California San Diego

California State University San Marcos

2026

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Vita

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Navigating the Transition from High School to Adulthood: Insights from Graduates with
Borderline Intellectual Functioning Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

by

Tabitha Seaver

Doctor of Education in Education Leadership

University of California, San Diego, 2026
California State University, San Marcos, 2026

Professor Christoforos Mamas, Chair

Students with borderline intellectual functioning (BIF), typically defined as IQ scores between 70–85, occupy a particularly vulnerable and understudied position in secondary transition. They often do not qualify for intensive intellectual disability services yet struggle to meet traditional academic and graduation expectations, leaving them underserved by existing structures. This qualitative multiple case study design, incorporating cross-case analysis, examined the transition experiences of seven high school graduates with BIF from a comprehensive high school in Southern California, guided by Self-Determination Theory. Data included document analysis of IEPs, ITPs, and transcripts, alongside semi-structured interviews.

Cross-case thematic analysis revealed four interconnected findings: self-determination thrived when students felt competent and heard; relationships and interest-based learning were powerful yet underutilized; life-skills instruction was fragmented; and connections to external supports were weak. These findings suggest that identical graduation pathways do not produce equity for students with BIF. The study offers implications for IEP case managers, school and district leaders, and recommendations for more flexible pathways, robust life-skills preparation, and transition practices centered on student voice and self-determination.

Keywords: Borderline intellectual functioning, Secondary transition planning, Self-determination, Student voice, Life skills instruction, Educational equity

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2020, 13 percent of students in the United States who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) dropped out of school, compared to only 5.3 percent of general education students (Thurlow & Johnson, 2011; NCES, 2023). Students with disabilities have the third-lowest high school graduation rate nationally, outranking only English learners and students experiencing homelessness (Atwell et al., 2019). These educational disparities have serious consequences in adulthood. Approximately 82 percent of the United States prison population is considered high school dropouts, and 85 percent of all juvenile cases involve youth who have left school without a diploma (Stanard, 2003; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). When examining outcomes for students with disabilities as adults, unemployment is one key indicator of postschool success. In 2025, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities ages 16 to 64 was 8.3 percent, roughly twice the rate of adults without identified disabilities at 4.1 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025; Thurlow & Johnson, 2001; Thurlow et al., 2002). While this represents a persistent employment gap, employment rates for people with disabilities remain significantly lower, with only 22.8 percent employed compared to 65.2 percent of those without disabilities (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Research suggests that outcomes can improve when students with disabilities are provided with meaningful voice in high school, an individualized course of study, and access to a variety of elective options that align with their needs and goals (Cavendish et al., 2019; Holquist et al., 2023; Row et al., 2021). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) indicates that when students experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their coursework and school relationships, they are more motivated to persevere toward their goals (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Incorporating students' wants and needs into transition planning encourages teams to design

realistic, collaboratively developed postschool plans, which is associated with improved graduation, employment outcomes, and earnings and reduced long-term public costs, and is mandated under the transition provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004).

Public schools in the United States have been working to create and refine programs, pathways, and supports for students with disabilities since the 1970s. Because public education systems were not originally designed with students with disabilities in mind, the support structures within schools do not always fully reflect or champion the diverse needs of these learners (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). In recent decades, a wide range of approaches, including co-teaching, full inclusion, differentiated instruction, and universally designed instruction, have been implemented across states to support students with both mild and more significant support needs and to promote participation in general education settings (Francisco et al., 2020). However, even with this expanded attention to inclusive practices, important gaps remain. Some subgroups of students with disabilities continue to lack adequate, appropriately tailored programs and supports (Shaw, 2008; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). One particular group that appears to be especially affected is students with what is commonly referred to as borderline intellectual functioning (BIF).

Students with BIF represent a uniquely underserved group within special education. These students often fall into a gap; they do not meet criteria for more intensive support provided to those with intellectual disabilities, yet they face significant challenges navigating traditional academic expectations (Shaw, 2008, Sullivan & Bal, 2013). As a result, existing educational structures such as graduation requirements, course offerings, and transition planning often fail to align with their specific learning needs and postsecondary goals. The term borderline intellectual

functioning (BIF) describes a group of people who function on the border between typical intellectual functioning and intellectual disability. In figure 1, people with BIF fall between 1 and 2 standard deviations below the mean on the typical curve of the distribution of intelligence, roughly an IQ between 70 and 85 (Wieland & Zitman, 2016).

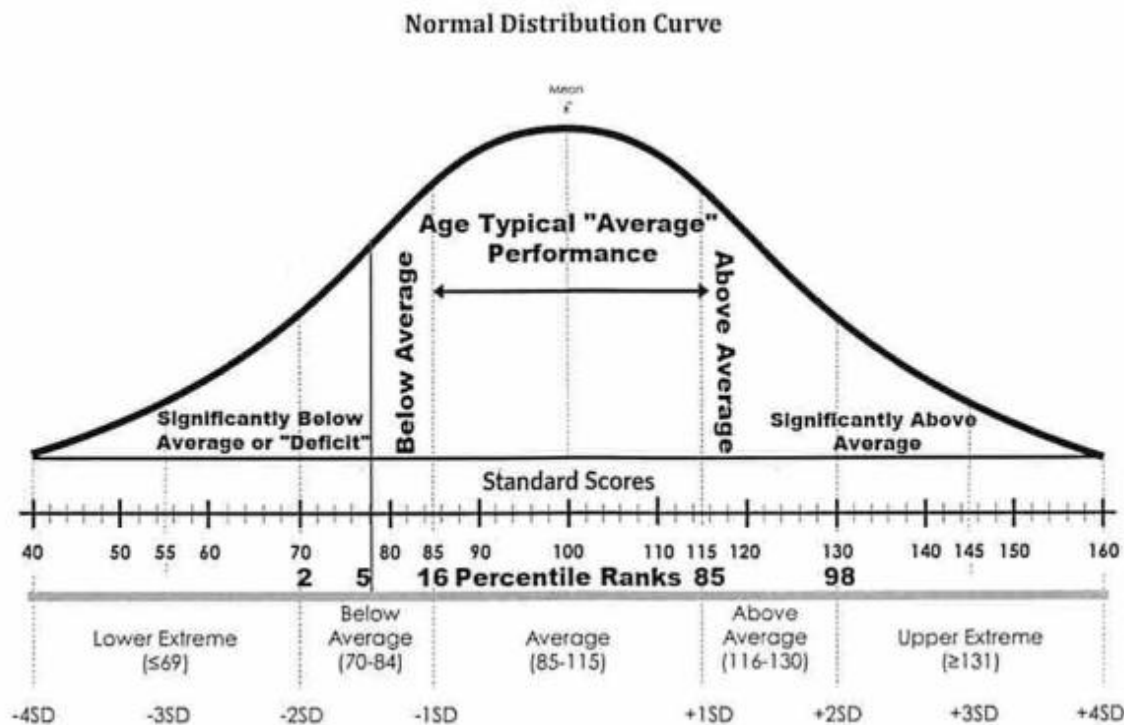


Figure 1: Distribution of IQ across the Population. Taken from the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence | Second Edition (WASI-II)

For reference, 100 is considered an average IQ score (Wechsler, 2011). It is important to point out that IQ tests have many documented issues. The history of IQ scores, how they are gathered, how they are used, who they are used on and what they mean, are widely debated across different avenues of academia (Peltopuro et al., 2014). However, in the K-12 arena it is still one of the scores that are required to help determine if a student has a disability. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), IQ testing is a key component in diagnosing intellectual disabilities and specific learning disabilities, ensuring that students

receive appropriate interventions and services tailored to their needs. IDEA mandates that schools conduct comprehensive evaluations, including intellectual assessments, to determine eligibility for special education services and re-evaluate students at least every three years (IDEA, 2004). By using IQ scores alongside other assessments, educators can make informed decisions about placement, course of study, instructional strategies, and accommodations to support students' academic and developmental growth. It is generally accepted that IQ testing should not be the only metric for determining disabilities or support needs. Tests that measure a student's adaptive skills are often more adequate in gaining a better understanding of the full spectrum of needs a student with an intellectual disability might have (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Wieland & Zitman, 2016). While IQ scores should not be used as a sole measure of someone's ability, they are used in eligibility testing, therefore I will be utilizing IQ testing to isolate the particular population of students this study focuses on.

Historically speaking, when adaptive scores and intellectual scores are below 70, a person might be considered intellectually disabled. In K-12, that student would most likely be in a higher needs program, working towards a certificate of completion instead of a diploma. People who have an IQ score that is between one to two standard deviations below the average, which would be in the 70-85 range, are considered to have BIF. Assuming a typical distribution of intelligence, about 13.6% of the population would fit into this category; however it is a topic that is rarely studied in education (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Wieland & Zitman, 2016). This particular group of students who are considered to have BIF do not meet the requirements to be considered Intellectually Disabled, however, they are also not within the typical range in their ability to reason, gain and retain new information (Wieland & Zitman, 2016). This group of students are often forced into one of the two plans that are already created for high school; diploma or

certificate of completion. Neither of those plans were created with the students who have a BIF in mind (Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). There is not a clear program of study, meaningful elective choices that support their transition goals, options for training, or support transitioning out of high school and into adult life for students with BIF (Cimera et al., 2018; Gonzales, 2023). When students in Special Education do not find a pathway that supports their academic needs as well as their transition goals, they are more likely to drop out of high school (Cimera et al., 2018; Gonzales, 2023; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011).

Transition planning takes place when the IEP team collaborates to determine both the required high school courses a student must take and the elective opportunities that align with the student's postsecondary career or education goals. One of the most challenging aspects of this process is navigating discrepancies related to the student's course of study, particularly when deciding whether the student will graduate with a diploma or a certificate of completion. For Education Specialists working in public high schools, this process can feel like answering to two different authorities: Special Education law and district policy. While the IEP team is legally empowered to create an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) that supports a course of study tailored to the student's unique needs and future aspirations; and this plan is legally binding, the student must still meet the same graduation requirements as their general education peers in order to earn a diploma. This tension between individualized planning and standardized policy often creates significant barriers to truly student-centered transition planning. In 2016, San Diego and several other districts in California adopted A-G Requirements as graduation requirements for high school students. A-G requirements are a list of 30 college prep courses that are required in order to apply for admission to either of California state's public university systems; the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) directly after high school

(Betts., et al. 2016). For these courses to count as A-G, students need to earn a C or better in the college prep courses without significant modifications, however since the new requirements are challenging, many districts will allow students to graduate high school if they earn a D or higher in A-G required classes (Betts et al., 2016).

As A-G graduation requirements become increasingly standardized across the state, students with BIF may face heightened challenges in meeting these academic benchmarks, raising critical questions about how well current transition planning processes support their ability to achieve postsecondary goals. This study seeks to examine whether the educational experiences and transition planning provided to students with BIF, particularly in the context of these rigorous academic requirements, foster a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and ultimately support successful transitions into adult life. Table 1 shows the addition of A-G graduation requirements compared to the minimum graduation requirements for the state of California.

Table 1

*Comparison of California Graduation Requirements and Stars Hollow High School
(Pseudonym)*

Requirement	CA Minimum Requirement	HS Graduation for Stars Hollow High	A-G
History	30	30	20
English	30	40	40
Math	20 including Algebra 1	30 Algebra 1, Geometry 3rd year math	30 Algebra 1, Geometry, Algebra 2
Science	20	20	20
World Language	N/A	10	20 2 years consecutive
VAPA	10 1 course of either VAPA, World Lang or CTE	10	10
PE	20	20	20
Electives	N/A	60	10
Total Credits	130	230	*3.0 or higher *C or better in all courses *no minimum credit requirement

Since these new requirements are still slowly being implemented across California and other states, there appears to be a lack of student voice in the current research available about the impacts of these requirements. Capturing student voice is imperative to understanding the benefits, areas for concern and potential pitfalls that are in place within any system (Cook-Sather, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mertler, 2019). Research has shown that student involvement in educational decision-making leads to increased engagement, motivation, and a sense of ownership over their learning (Cook-Sather, 2020; Holquist et al., 2023). When

students are given the opportunity to share their insights, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how new programs affect them academically, socially, and emotionally. Additionally, including student perspectives can help identify unintended barriers, such as increased stress or inequitable access to resources, which may not be evident to policymakers and educators alone (Cook-Sather, 2020). While graduation requirements continue to increase for general education students, there are potential negative impacts on students with disabilities, and students with BIF in particular (Betts et al. 2016; Peltopuro et al., 2014; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011).

This study aimed to explore the perspectives of graduated students with BIF and their experiences in a Southern California high school's special education program. Specifically, it sought to examine how their required coursework and transition support influenced their adjustment to adulthood after graduation. By interviewing students who had already graduated with a diploma, rather than those still in high school, the study gathered insights from young adults who had completed the process and transitioned beyond high school.

The study employed qualitative multiple case study design, incorporating cross-case analysis to examine the experiences of former students with BIF who had graduated within the past four years. Rather than simply documenting services received, the study sought to understand how these young adults experienced autonomy, competence, and relatedness during high school, and how those experiences shaped their engagement in transition planning, their course selections, and their early pathways into adulthood. By centering the voices of students with BIF, the findings illuminate where current transition practices support or constrain self-determination, and identify concrete ways education specialists, IEP teams, and secondary

leaders might redesign planning processes, coursework, and agency linkages to provide more equitable and developmentally appropriate support for this often-overlooked group.

Statement of the Problem

Self-determination research has shown a strong correlation between low levels of intrinsic motivation, limited autonomy, and diminished perceived competence, all key factors that contribute to higher dropout rates among students (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). While these dynamics have been broadly examined in general and special education populations, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding how they affect students with BIF. Despite qualifying for special education services under other disability categories, students with BIF are often underrepresented in research and underserved in practice, particularly in the areas of individualized transition planning and student-driven goal setting (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Current interventions frequently fail to meaningfully address the psychological needs of this group, resulting in disengagement and long-term disadvantages such as elevated rates of dropout, unemployment, and mental health concerns (Cole et al., 2022; Doll et al., 2013; Peltopuro et al., 2014; Smith & Smith, 2001; Suk et al., 2020).

These outcomes underscore the need for educators and policymakers to implement more responsive supports, including flexible graduation pathways, student-led transition planning, and expanded postsecondary options that reflect students' interests and strengths. Transition teams, in particular, should be empowered to develop personalized and realistic plans that are academically rigorous while still aligning with each student's aspirations. By centering student voices and examining the lived experiences of former students with BIF, this study sought to fill a critical gap in the literature and contribute to the development of more inclusive, motivating, and equitable education policies and practices.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students with BIF and examine how self-determination factors contributed to their academic engagement, transition planning, and early adult outcomes. By centering the perspectives of former students with BIF, the study sought to generate insight into how autonomy, competence, and relatedness were supported or constrained during high school and how these experiences shaped their motivation and preparedness for life after graduation. In doing so, the study aimed to inform how educational systems might better address the needs of this group and help reduce persistent achievement and opportunity gaps.

While existing research has established a connection between self-determination and postschool outcomes for students with disabilities, relatively little was known about how these dynamics operate for students in special education who have BIF. Because of this lack of content in the research, much of the previous literature that pushed this study forward was focused on students with moderate disabilities; more than directly about students with BIF. Prior studies have linked low intrinsic motivation, limited autonomy, and diminished perceived competence to elevated dropout risk, yet the specific ways these factors are experienced by students with BIF have been insufficiently documented (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). Additionally, although research emphasizes the importance of goal-setting, parent expectations, and student autonomy in promoting successful transitions, there has been limited attention to how these elements can be tailored for students with BIF who are working to meet graduation requirements while also preparing for adult life (Cole et al., 2022; Peltopuro et al., 2014).

To address these gaps, this study drew on semi-structured interviews (Appendix D) and document review to understand how former students with BIF made sense of their high school

experiences, the role self-determination played in their choices and opportunities, and the extent to which transition activities planned by IEP teams; including course requirements, elective options, and vocational experiences, supported their later independence. These aims led to the following research question and subquestions.

Research Question

How do young adults with borderline intellectual functioning describe the transition support they received through their individualized transition plans?

- A. In what ways did their sense of self-determination (or lack thereof) impact their motivation and ability to navigate life after high school?
- B. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood?
- C. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?

These research questions are grounded in the need to better understand how current transition planning practices serve students with BIF, a population often overlooked in both special education policy and practice. The questions reflect the core purpose of this study: to explore the lived experiences of students with BIF as they transitioned from high school to adulthood, and to examine the role that self-determination and individualized planning may play in shaping their outcomes. By aligning the research questions with the identified gap, specifically the mismatch between current educational structures and the needs of students with BIF, this study seeks to generate insights that can inform more effective, inclusive, and supportive transition practices.

Overview of Methods

This study used a qualitative multiple case study design, incorporating cross-case analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to explore the experiences of high school students with BIF during their transition to adulthood. Participants were purposefully selected using a homogeneous sampling technique to identify seven former students who shared the experience of having BIF, graduating within the previous four years, and earning a diploma from the same high school (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertler, 2019). Centering the stories of students who had lived these processes was intended to inform educators and policymakers seeking to improve transition systems.

To maintain anonymity, the high school is referred to by the pseudonym Stars Hollow High School. Stars Hollow High School is a public high school in Southern California that, at the time of the study, served approximately 3,380 students, 11.5 percent of whom were identified as students with disabilities. Participants were selected based on specific criteria using homogeneous sampling to ensure they met the requirements for the study, including having an

IQ in the range considered BIF (Mertler, 2019). Although all participants had documented disabilities, they were non-conserved adults, meaning they retained full legal rights to make their own decisions regarding education, employment, and other aspects of daily life.

To identify eligible participants, I reviewed students' Multidisciplinary Psychological Reports, which are part of their IEP records and are updated every three years. As a case manager and Education Specialist at Stars Hollow High School, I had access to these documents as part of my professional responsibilities. To mitigate potential conflicts of interest arising from my dual role as both researcher and educator, I obtained IRB approval from my academic institution and district-level authorization, and I implemented safeguards such as de-identifying data where possible and assigning pseudonyms to all participants. Through the review of Multidisciplinary Reports, I identified former students who met the IQ criterion for BIF (70–85) and who had graduated with a high school diploma, ensuring that the data reflected a consistent experience of students who completed the requirements of a comprehensive high school.

In addition to conducting interviews, I carried out document analyses of each participant's IEP transition planning materials and academic transcripts. The goal of this analysis was to extract key data points, such as stated transition goals (for example, employment, vocational training, or college), recommended supports, and the courses actually completed during high school. By comparing each student's Individualized Transition Plan with their transcript, I examined the alignment between planned transition goals and educational pathways. This comparison provided insight into the extent to which transition planning functioned as a coherent guide for postsecondary preparation.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, allowing for rich, personal accounts of each participant's transition experience. This interview approach is well suited to case study research because it provides flexibility to probe unique individual stories while maintaining a consistent structure across participants (Cook-Sather, 2020). The interview questions were informed by Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, focusing specifically on autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Questions were designed to explore whether participants felt involved and supported during transition planning or whether the process felt passive and disconnected from their goals and interests.

Listening to students' lived experiences and analyzing their responses through the lens of Self-Determination Theory helped to illuminate the degree to which they felt empowered throughout the transition process. This approach was grounded in research showing that low levels of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and perceived competence are closely linked to disengagement and higher dropout rates (Lareau, 2021; Thurlow et al., 2002). By examining how these factors influenced the transition experiences of students with BIF, the study generated findings that may inform future institutional practices and policy decisions aimed at creating more equitable and effective pathways to adulthood for students receiving special education services.

Significance of the Study

While there is some research on the academic outcomes and experiences of students with disabilities, there is limited empirical focus on students who meet the criteria for BIF, particularly regarding their high school experiences meeting graduation requirements. Special education encompasses a broad range of disabilities, but research often lacks specificity about the unique needs of this diverse population. This study aims to contribute towards addressing this

gap by using student voice to examine the experiences of students with BIF as they navigate the process of earning a high school diploma and their adjustment to adulthood after graduation. The purpose of this research is to provide insight into how high school experiences, academic supports, and transition planning can be better aligned with the strengths and future goals of these students. The findings from this study can inform educational leaders about the importance of developing more flexible pathways and individualized supports for this group, ensuring that students see the value in their education and are motivated to persevere. By creating tailored options that support students with BIF in their transition to adulthood, this study seeks to have a lasting, positive impact on their educational experiences. Furthermore, it could inform broader discussions on graduation requirements, elective options, and policies that affect students with IEPs, ultimately improving transition planning and outcomes for these students.

Definition of Terms

Adulthood- In this study, it is used to describe the practical skills and decisions required to manage everyday adult life (e.g., money, housing, transportation, paperwork, and self-advocacy) rather than simply reaching a particular age.

Borderline Intellectual Functioning/Disability (BIF)- a group of people who function on the border between typical intellectual functioning and intellectual disability, between 1 and 2 standard deviations below the mean on the normal curve of the distribution of intelligence, roughly an IQ between 70 and 85 (Wieland & Zitman, 2016).

Course of Study- multi-year description of a student's coursework during high school, from the current year to anticipated graduation year, in order to enable the student to meet district graduation requirements and their post secondary transition goals.

Graduation- the act of completing a course of study that leads to the culmination of either a certificate of completion, or high school diploma.

This chapter has outlined the context, rationale, and significance of exploring the transition experiences of students with borderline intellectual functioning (BIF) through the lens of self-determination theory. By identifying the gap between educational structures and the needs of this often-overlooked population, the chapter established the foundation for the study's purpose and research questions. The next chapter will present a review of the relevant literature, further placing this research within the broader scholarly conversation and providing theoretical grounding for the methodological choices in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This literature review explores various perspectives on Special Education, with a specific focus on self-determination, transition planning, and their impact on students with borderline intellectual functioning (BIF) during high school and post-graduation. To identify key themes, I conducted a qualitative theme-based analysis of over 60 peer-reviewed studies, policy reports, and state statistics related to transition planning, graduation requirements, and postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those with BIF. The review process involved systematic searches across academic databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, and SAGE Journals using keywords such as borderline intellectual functioning, transition planning, graduation pathways, special education outcomes, student voice, and self-determination theory. Studies were selected based on their relevance to the research questions and their focus on secondary education and post-high school transitions.

Through this analysis, several central themes emerged: (1) the fiscal impacts on students, families, and communities; (2) the implications of choosing and implementing a specific individual course of study; and (3) graduation options and their influence on future independence and success. These themes were chosen because they highlight both practical and systemic challenges that shape the long-term outcomes of students with BIF, particularly in areas of equity, access, and educational policy. They also align with broader discussions on educational accountability, student agency, and inclusive support systems. To provide a comprehensive understanding of these issues, this literature review is structured to first offer an overview of the history of Special Education and Transition Planning, followed by an analysis of their current implementation in U.S. education systems. It also examines both the positive and negative

implications of transition plans for students with BIF, establishing the need for more student-centered, individualized approaches to postsecondary success.

Not having a supported and specially designed pathway for students with BIF has been found to lead to more drop outs, increased rates of unemployment, higher rates of incarceration and several other negative family, social and community impacts (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Thurlow et al., 2002; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). Students with BIF often do not have a program or place within the public school system that fits their educational and transition needs during their high school career. The students who graduate and enter the workforce are often unprepared for independence or responsibilities of adulthood and the students who cannot meet the expectations for graduation often drop out of high school. This trajectory impacts not only the student, but their families, and communities (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Thurlow et al., 2002; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). These challenges highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the psychological factors that influence student engagement and long-term success; an area where Self-Determination Theory offers a valuable framework for exploring the roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in educational outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Conceptual Framework

Self-Determination Theory

Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci coined the term Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in their book titled, “Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination Theory in Human Behavior” in 1985. Self-determination theory is a theory that focuses on motivation, where people get their motivation to persevere and how they lose said motivation. Self-Determination Theory, as shown in figure 2, posits that all humans have three basic psychological needs to promote proper growth and development into adulthood and beyond. The three needs are Autonomy, Competence and

Relatedness. Autonomy refers to feeling like you have a choice and being willing to participate in something, the opposite of this being when someone is feeling compelled or controlled into something. Competence is the experience of mastery and being effective in the activity you chose to complete. The last need is relatedness, which refers to the need to feel connected to the activity and feel a sense of belongingness with others (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The theory focuses on types of motivation (intrinsic vs extrinsic) as predictors of performance, relational, and well-being outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Self-determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017)

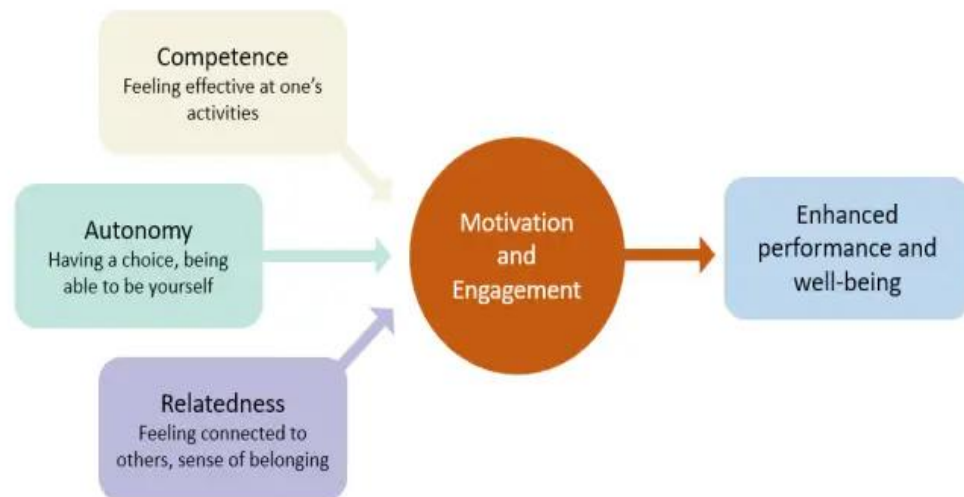


Figure 2: Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is a common framework within Special Education philosophies because it often centers the students first, before the environment demands (Ward, 2005). All populations of people benefit from feeling competent in their tasks, autonomous in their decision making and relatedness in their work and relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Teenagers and young adults often feel out of control of their lives, and this is not any different for students with BIF. For example, in 2001, a study compared students from both the United States and Russia

who perceived their teachers and parents as autonomy supportive and both experienced greater wellbeing (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). Other studies have shown that when young adults feel autonomy support from their families and partners they report higher levels of happiness and satisfaction (Frielink et al., 2018).

Another study (2018) explored the connection between Self-Determination Theory and autonomy support, need satisfaction, autonomous motivation and subjective well-being in people with Mild to Borderline levels of intellectual functioning. The results showed that similar to the general population, autonomy support, autonomous motivation and satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence are important interrelated concepts for people with mild to borderline intellectual functioning in order to achieve subjective well-being (Frielink et al., 2018). The research reiterated that personal competence, autonomy and relatedness is critical for a positive human experience. Providing these experiences with the tenets of SDT is more important than providing support that focuses on the discrepancy between personal competence of people with BIF and the environmental demands (i.e graduation requirements).

Using Ryan and Deci's theory for Self-Determination within the context of the problem for this study, it is evident that there are several barriers currently impacting the educational experience for some students within Special Education. Figure 3 is used to conceptualize the Self-determination barriers BIF students might face throughout their high school career. Taking classes you are not prepared for, and being required to take classes that do not align with your personal transition goals often leads to a lack of motivation and withdrawal (Deci & Ryan, 1985, Deci & Ryan, 2000). Since students in Special Education drop out of high school and are unemployed at rates twice that of non-disabled peers, there are obvious gaps in the system which

allow for students to fall through. Self-determination is a practice that has been utilized in Special education since the 1970s, however most research is focused on people with severe disabilities (Ward, 2005).

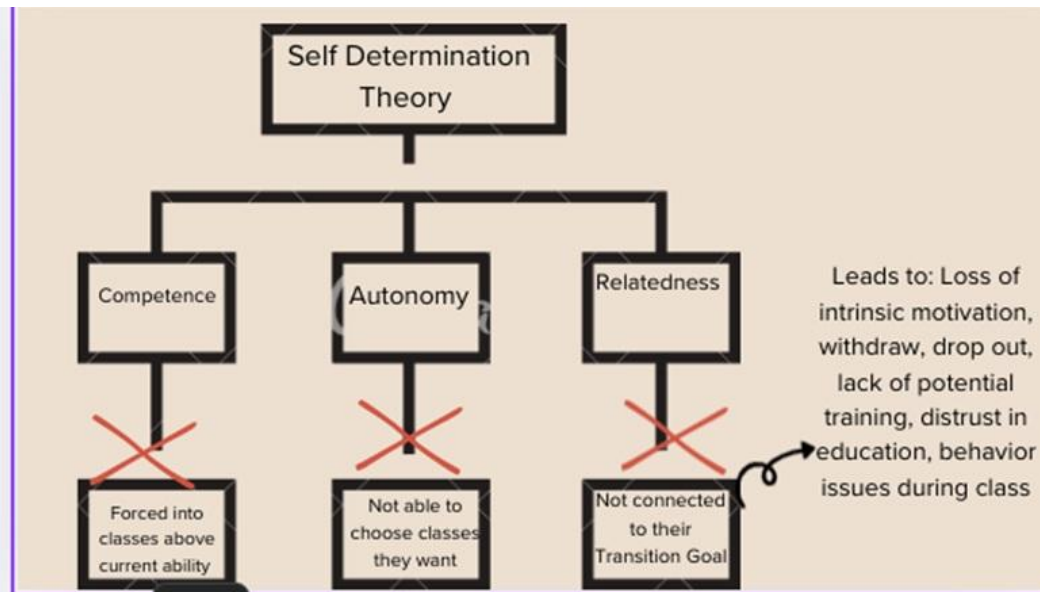


Figure 3: Self Determination Theory Connection to Student High School Barriers

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provided a solid foundation for advancing a narrative case study of how former students' sense of self-determination shaped their motivation and ability to navigate life post-high school. SDT indicates that individuals are most highly motivated when their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This study collected qualitative information through in-depth, semi-structured interviews from former students, where they were able to connect personal experience to certain beliefs about their self-determination during and following high school. Analysis of the data involved thematic coding, in which recurring patterns and prominent themes of autonomy, motivation, and post-secondary navigation were discerned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). Findings were explained through the SDT constructs discussed above, considering the extent to which participants' control over their own education and life choices influenced their post-graduation

achievement. Results were presented in terms of narrative case studies, using rich, descriptive accounts to document individual experiences, highlighting the role of self-determination in shaping motivation and long-term success. By grounding this research in SDT, the study highlighted how schools can foster self-efficacy and autonomy to support more effective transitions to adulthood, particularly for students with BIF, ultimately leading to a more positive high school experience, higher graduation and employment rates, and an improved quality of life for one of our most vulnerable student populations.

Qualifying for an IEP

The process of determining whether a student qualifies for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law that ensures students with disabilities receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) tailored to their unique needs. The process typically begins with a referral for evaluation, which may be initiated by a teacher, parent, or other school personnel when a student is suspected of having a disability that adversely affects their educational performance (IDEA, 2004). Once consent is obtained from the parent or guardian, a multidisciplinary team conducts a comprehensive evaluation in all areas of suspected disability.

The evaluation must be conducted within a specific timeframe; usually 60 days of receiving parental consent, though timelines may vary by state and must use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information (IDEA, 2004). The results of this evaluation are then reviewed by a team that includes educators, specialists, the student's parents, and, when appropriate, the student. To qualify for an IEP, the student must meet two criteria: (1) they must be identified as having one or more of the 13 disability categories recognized under IDEA, and (2) the disability must

adversely affect their educational performance, thereby necessitating special education services (IDEA, 2004). If the student is found eligible, the IEP team then collaborates to develop a written plan that outlines the student's current levels of performance, measurable annual goals, accommodations, modifications, and the specific services and supports the student will receive. The IEP is reviewed at least annually and must be updated to reflect the student's progress and changing needs.

Qualifying Disabilities

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), a student may qualify for an IEP under one or more of the following 13 disability categories:

1. **Autism**
2. **Deaf-Blindness**
3. **Deafness**
4. **Emotional Disturbance**
5. **Hearing Impairment**
6. **Intellectual Disability**
7. **Multiple Disabilities**
8. **Orthopedic Impairment**
9. **Other Health Impairment (OHI)** – including conditions like ADHD
10. **Specific Learning Disability (SLD)** – including dyslexia, dyscalculia, etc.
11. **Speech or Language Impairment**
12. **Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)**
13. **Visual Impairment**, including blindness

It is important to note that students with BIF, identified by IQ scores ranging from 70 to 85, do not automatically qualify for special education services under IDEA, as BIF is not one of the 13 recognized disability categories. Moreover, these students often do not meet eligibility criteria under the Specific Learning Disability (SLD) category either, since their academic performance may be low but not significantly discrepant from their cognitive ability, especially in states or districts that use a discrepancy model for SLD determination. As a result, students with BIF frequently exist in a gray area; their learning and adaptive needs may be substantial but not formally recognized by the legal frameworks intended to support students with disabilities.

This exclusion can lead to inadequate support, under-identification, and poor postsecondary outcomes for a population that may require tailored interventions but is not always eligible to receive them (Cole et al., 2022; MacMillan & Forness, 1998).

For the purposes of this study, however, the focus was on the subset of students with BIF who did meet IDEA eligibility under one of the 13 categories and therefore had IEPs.

Participants may have been formally identified, for example, under categories such as Specific Learning Disability, Other Health Impairment, or Speech or Language Impairment while also having IQ scores in the 70 to 85 range. Throughout this dissertation, references to “students with disabilities” or “students with BIF” therefore describe young people whose documented eligibility fell under an IDEA category other than BIF, but whose cognitive profiles were consistent with borderline intellectual functioning.

Categorizing Needs

When a student is suspected of having a disability, a multidisciplinary team initiates an evaluation process using a range of assessments, including measures of intelligence, academic achievement, adaptive behavior, cognitive processing, speech and language, visual-motor integration, and behavior rating scales (IDEA, 2004). Once the assessments are complete, the data is analyzed by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, typically including a school psychologist, special educators, general educators, and the student’s guardians, to determine whether the student qualifies for special education services and, if so, under which of the 13 federally recognized categories of disability (IDEA, 2004).

In most public high schools, special education services are structured around a binary framework: students are typically placed in either mild to moderate support needs programs or moderate to extensive support needs programs (Cole et al., 2022). This determination becomes a

pivotal decision during the IEP process, as it significantly influences the student's academic pathway and eventual graduation outcome; either a high school diploma or a Certificate of Completion. The decision often hinges on the student's performance in key areas: academic achievement, adaptive behavior, and cognitive ability. For example, students diagnosed with a learning disability, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dysgraphia, often score within the average or above-average range on IQ assessments and are placed in mild to moderate support programs where they are expected to work toward a standard diploma (Peltopuro et al., 2014).

On the other end of the spectrum, students diagnosed with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities (typically defined by IQ scores below 70), multiple disabilities, or serious emotional disturbance are more often placed in extensive support needs programs. These programs emphasize functional academics, life skills, and community integration, and students following this pathway usually graduate with a Certificate of Completion (Thurlow et al., 2002; Doll et al., 2013).

However, students with BIF (IQ 70–85) fall into a challenging middle ground (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Shaw, 2008). They do not meet the criteria for an intellectual disability, nor do they always qualify for specific learning disabilities if their academic struggles are seen as consistent with their cognitive profile. Students with BIF have a truly “moderate” disability. In practice, they function between the mild and extensive ends of the continuum, yet BIF is not one of the 13 federally recognized disability categories, which leaves them in an “in between” status within school documentation and placement systems (IDEA, 2004; Peltopuro et al., 2014). As a result, special education terminology and placement decisions for this group often remain gray, even though research has frequently situated students with BIF within the broader literature on moderate disabilities, a category that is more visible in research than in day-to-day school

structures (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Shaw, 2008). Consequently, they often don't fit neatly into either the diploma-bound or certificate-bound pathway. For instance, a student with BIF may possess strong adaptive or social-emotional skills, making them well-suited for employment or independent living, yet may not be able to meet grade-level academic standards without significant curriculum modifications. Because eligibility decisions and placement are typically guided by a binary model, the nuanced needs of these students can be overlooked.

This binary system does not always account for the complexity of student profiles, especially those of students with BIF. IDEA guidance recommends that IEP teams consider both the student's academic abilities and their postsecondary support needs when determining graduation pathways (IDEA, 2004; Thurlow et al., 2002). If a student is expected to need extensive support after high school; such as through an Adult Transition Program, they are often placed on a certificate track. In contrast, students who are able to meet grade-level standards without significant modification may be placed on a diploma track (Thurlow et al., 2002). However, these rigid distinctions do not always align with reality. Students with BIF may require some modifications to succeed academically while also demonstrating the adaptive competencies necessary for competitive employment or postsecondary education. In this way, the system's current structure can unintentionally marginalize students whose needs fall outside the conventional categories.

California's teacher credentialing system also reflects this binary structure, requiring special education teachers to pursue credentials in either Mild to Moderate Support Needs (MMSN) or Extensive Support Needs (ESN), further reinforcing the two-track approach to student placement and support. To better serve the BIF population, schools must implement truly individualized supports, including tailored instruction, accommodations, transition services, and

ongoing guidance (Smith & Smith, 2001; Thurlow et al., 2002). Research shows that when students with disabilities receive appropriate transition planning and targeted interventions, they are more likely to graduate and pursue postsecondary education or employment (Cole et al., 2022). In contrast, misplacement or under-support often leads to disengagement, increased dropout rates, and limited adult outcomes; particularly for students like those with BIF, whose needs are often invisible in a system not designed for nuance (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Cole et al., 2022).

History of Special Education

Until the mid 1800s, most formal education was only available to the wealthy. Reformers of current education opportunities at the time insisted that public education for common people could create good citizens, unite society and prevent crime and poverty (Yell et al., 1998). As a result of this push, free public education was available to everyone at the elementary level by the end of the 19th century in the US. Eventually, the country started the discussion of mandating education for its children. The concept of compulsory school attendance spread after Rhode Island passed the first law in 1840, other states followed suit and, by 1918, all states had compulsory attendance laws. Regardless of these laws, students with disabilities were still excluded from educational settings in many cases. Compulsory education was the stepping stone that many parents and advocates would eventually use to further their case for the inclusion of students with disabilities (Francisco et al., 2020; Yell et al., 1998). After compulsory education was implemented, schools still had the opportunity to decline students, and often did if they had a mental or physical disability. Well into the 20th century, communities and courts were still in disagreement over who should be afforded the free public education that was being offered. In both 1958 (Supreme Court of Illinois, in *Department of Public Welfare v. Haas*) and 1969 (State

of North Carolina), courts validated the decision to keep students with disabilities out of school by upholding legislation that denied access to students whom officials determined would not benefit from public education because they were “feeble minded”, “mentally deficient” or students who might be disruptive to other students (Yell et al., 1998).

During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States went through a time that led to significant growth for many marginalized groups. The Civil Rights Movement worked tirelessly to create changes in society that would afford all Americans equal opportunities. The movement focused largely on equal treatment and opportunities for African Americans, however, the litigation and changes in laws allowed for a more open discussion about constitutional protections for all minorities. This eventually led to the conversations about persons with disabilities and their civil rights. A landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954), stipulated that separating students on the basis of race was inherently unequal and that it was unconstitutional to do so. This was a monumental achievement in the Civil Rights Movement and has been the catalyst for ongoing civil rights advancements for African Americans as well as other minority groups in the United States. Although it took time, the ruling in *Brown*, 1954, paved the way for major changes within the public education system, especially for students with disabilities. *Brown*, paired with the Fourteenth Amendment that stated that states could not deny any person equal protection under the law meant that, if states decided to provide public education to its citizens, this must be done for all of its citizens. Over the next decade, parent advocate groups and state lawmakers worked together to continue expanding access to education for students with disabilities in their states (Francisco et al., 2020; Yell et al., 1998).

By 1975, the federal government joined the conversation and connected the various pieces of state legislation into an all-inclusive law addressing education for students with

disabilities. With the backing from President Gerald Ford, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA, 1975). The goal was for EAHCA to assist the states in protecting the rights of, meeting the individual needs of, and improving the results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families (Francisco et al., 2020; Yell et al., 1998). EAHCA mandated several things, one of them being the creation of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for students who qualified for disability services. With the backing of the federal government, funding was secured and used to help states create programs that would support students with disabilities. Over time, new developments and advancements in our understanding of disabilities and ways to provide intervention changed. With that came several other laws and mandates that helped shape public education to what it is today. After EAHCA, the landmark law's name changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, in a 1990 reauthorization. The Department of Education continuously makes adjustments as needed and the law was last reauthorized and updated in 2004. Today, all students between the ages of 6-18 are legally required to attend school, with minor exceptions. Since all students are required to attend school, there are legally mandated processes in place to ensure that students who are suspected of a disability are properly tested and supported through their educational career (Yell et al., 1998).

Individual Transition Plan

In 1997, IDEA also added the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) to its requirements (Transition Planning Requirements of IDEA, 2004). Transition support in an IEP is defined as, the coordinated activities and services designed to help students with disabilities prepare for and transition to life after high school, focusing on post-secondary education, employment, and independent living (Johnson & Sharpe, 2000). The 1997 version of IDEA stated that transition

planning must begin at 14 years. Unexpectedly, instead of maintaining the mandatory transition planning age at 14, the 2004 IDEA reauthorization changed the mandatory transition planning age to 16 years or earlier when appropriate (Suk et al., 2020). There was a growing rationale for creating these new provisions based on data that showed many young adults with disabilities exit high school unprepared for adult life. The studies showed high levels of unemployment, underemployment, economic instability, dependence on family, social isolation, low levels of motivation to participate in postsecondary education and training programs (Johnson & Sharpe, 2000). Furthermore, it is mandated that the student's course of study in high school must align with their postsecondary goals such as higher education, employment, and independent living (IDEA, 2004). For example, a student interested in becoming a chef, should take courses that are in the culinary arts, or courses that would benefit their ability to transition into that workforce after high school.

Successful Transition Planning

An ITP team typically consists of the IEP team; the parent, student, education specialist, general education teacher and district representative, who is typically an assistant principal, as well as other representatives or agencies that could assist with the students transition to adulthood. With parent and student agreement, some of those agencies could be vocational rehabilitation, or disability resource representatives from a program or college the student is interested in attending (Brady et al., 2021). The transition plan is a two-page document that is written with the team during the IEP meeting. However, there are several assessments and interviews that should be conducted before the meeting so that the team has an understanding of what the student's interests are. During the meeting the team will review the assessments the student completed, and discuss the results. The assessment process should allow the student and

team to better understand what types of careers the student might be interested in as well as the personal goals the family and student might have for their adult life (Transition Planning Requirements of IDEA 2004; Brady et al., 2021).

Once the results are discussed the team moves on to goals. There are three different types of goals, the first two are required for every student and they are postsecondary training/education and postsecondary employment. The third goal is titled, Post Secondary Independent Living, which is only needed if the team feels it is appropriate (IDEA, 2004). Successful transition plan goals are written from the students' perspective and when possible, the student should be the main contributing voice when creating the goals (Furney & Salembier, 2000; Cook-Sather, 2020). Page two of the ITP starts with a section about course of study. The course of study is a multi-year description of a student's coursework during high school, from the current year to anticipated graduation year, in order to enable the student to meet their post secondary transition goals. It is essentially a list of all of the courses the student should take in order to reach their goals (Brady et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2005). If their goal requires a high school diploma, the student will need to complete the school's standard course work to meet graduation requirements. The student also chooses electives that will support their postsecondary goals during this time. After the course of study section the team will need to discuss if the chosen course of study will lead to a Diploma or a Certificate of Completion (Powers et al., 2005). A high school diploma is awarded to students who successfully meet all the academic requirements for graduation, while a certificate of completion is given to students who complete a specified program of study but may not have met all the academic requirements for a diploma, often due to special educational needs or other circumstances.

One limitation of transition plans is that it has to fit into the system the state/district has created. If a student would like to earn a diploma and the school's requirements are different from the state to earn that diploma, the student will need to meet the school's requirements to earn the diploma (IDEA, 2004; Powers et al., 2005). For example, a student who has the goal of becoming an auto mechanic would like to earn a diploma from his high school, and will then attend a certification program. The state of California only requires two years of math, with the highest level required being Algebra 1, however the school the student attends, requires Geometry and Algebra 2 or a third year equivalent to graduate. This particular student might have more significant struggles attaining the school requirements needed to earn the diploma due to their disability (Powers et al., 2005; NCES, 2023).

Students with BIF often face compounded barriers to academic and postsecondary success due to the intersection of cognitive challenges with other social and structural factors such as socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and race. Research shows that students from low-income households are disproportionately represented in special education and are at higher risk of having limited access to high-quality instructional materials, individualized support, and demanding academic pathways (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). English learners with cognitive or learning disabilities are, on the other hand, often under-identified or misidentified, thus their access to targeted services and transition planning becomes more challenging (Grindal et al., 2019; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Racial disparities also persist, particularly for Black and Latinx students, who are often overrepresented in special education programs under subjective categories like intellectual disability, while simultaneously being underserved in areas that promote autonomy, student voice and postsecondary readiness (Cook-Sather, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2008). These overlapping factors create a complex web of

disadvantage that makes it more difficult for students with BIF to achieve equitable outcomes. It is critical to understand these intersections and use this information in order to develop effective transition plans that are culturally responsive, linguistically appropriate, and responsive to the diverse strengths and needs of this population.

The importance of creating an attainable, realistic transition plan that includes the student and families perspective and goals is a common theme throughout all the literature on transition planning. The literature also sheds light on several other themes when discussing transition planning; fiscal impact on families, communities and the student, diversity of course options and graduation opportunities for students with disabilities. The following sections will examine other impacts of transition planning for both the student and their communities.

Fiscal Impacts on Individuals with BIF and Community

When transition teams take the time and resources to adequately get to know the student and write a detailed achievable transition plan, entire communities can benefit. Creating a successful transition plan for young adults that supports them in their postsecondary employment, education and independent living goals can have lasting positive implications for the community that the young adult lives in (Cimera et al., 2018; Gonzales, 2023). One indicator for a successful transition plan is meaningful employment. Supporting a student's transition goals for post-secondary education and career training benefits not only the student, but their entire family and communities.

Using descriptive statistics, a study that compared the outcome of young adults who had BIF and moderate Autism who received Postsecondary Educational Experience versus students without Post-Secondary Education showed that young adults with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorders) who earned a diploma and received postsecondary educational experience earned

almost \$100 a week more in income compared to young adults with ASD who earned a diploma but did not receive postsecondary educational experience (Whittenburg et al., 2019). A similar study reviewed a larger sample size and asked several different questions. One of those questions was, “Is Getting Postsecondary Education Cost-Effective?” The authors examined the benefits and costs of postsecondary education for individuals with BIF and the taxpayers who fund their education (Cimera et al., 2018). Investing in postsecondary education for individuals with intellectual disabilities can lead to a variety of benefits, including improved employment outcomes, increased earnings, and greater independence. They also suggest that these benefits can extend to taxpayers, as individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to contribute to the economy and require fewer government-funded support services (Cimera et al., 2018; Peltopuro, et al., 2014). One key finding from the study is that, on average, individuals with BIF who completed postsecondary education earned more than those who did not. The authors note that the average annual salary was \$13,800 higher than students who did not complete postsecondary education.

Changing focus from after high school financial impacts to during high school, it is important to know that an IEP is a legally mandated document and schools are held responsible for implementing them. Transition planning is also a mandatory part of the Individualized Education Program (IDEA, 2004). Effective transition planning for students with disabilities continues to be a concern for school leaders as many of these students struggle to find suitable employment, accessible post-secondary educational opportunities, and find the level of independent living they had hoped for after high school (Brady et al., 2021; West, 2009). There are several state agencies that work to insure school districts are following Special Education Law (National Council on Disability, 2023). If schools have not followed the transition plan,

there are monetary penalties to the district. In 2016, the case of Gibson versus Forest Hills Local school District was lost by the district because the team did not provide a timely transition assessment. The award was over 400 hours of transition related services and a total of \$327,641 in attorney fees. This fee came out of the public education budget for students with disabilities (Brady et al., 2021). There has been a trend of increasing legal cases involving transition plans which have decided in the favor of students with disabilities and their families (Prince et al., 2020). In many of these cases, the court awarded compensatory education or monetary awards to the student, including the reimbursement of significant attorney fees. The money used to pay school attorneys as well as pay for the compensatory education these cases receive, is all pulled from federal and state money that is awarded to our students with disabilities (Brady et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2005). Creating attainable Transition plans for students with BIF could save the student, community and school districts time and money (Cimera et al., 2018).

Some individuals with disabilities can receive supported employment before or after they graduate high school and should be included in their transition plan if appropriate. Supported employment is a program that assists and coaches adults with BIF search for competitive employment as well as assisting in facilitating continued education or mental health treatments as needed (Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019). One aspect of research on this topic aimed to decipher if the cost of supported employment was cost-efficient from the Taxpayer' perspective. The research Cimera and his team conducted showed that supported employees had a monthly net benefit (after subtracting the monthly gross cost of support) of \$251.34. For every dollar of cost taxpayers spent on supported unemployment they received an average of \$1.46 in benefits returned (Cimera, 2009). Federal and state governments spend billions of dollars on supporting our populations of adults with disabilities. However, of the total \$429 billion in state and federal

spending for adults with disabilities in 2008, 95 percent covered health care and income maintenance, with only 1.2 percent of the remaining budget allocated to improving employment and economic independence (Stapleton & Livermore, 2011).

There are clear benefits in providing students and young adults with BIF appropriate supported employment or training to avoid unemployment as they age. There are many impacts on a community when unemployment rates are high. These communities are more likely to have limited employment opportunities, low-quality housing, fewer available recreational activities, limited access to public transportation and public services and underfunded schools. These communities and people will often utilize state resources to supplement the income needed to survive (Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011; Whittenburg et al., 2019). Data continues to show that adults with disabilities are unemployed at double the rate of their peers, meaning that they are impacted at a much higher rate than the average adult (Gonzales, 2023; Peltopuro et al., 2014; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). When schools and communities do not properly support the transition to the workforce for our borderline students, the entire community is negatively impacted (Peltopuro et al., 2014).

Appropriate Course of Study

When transition plans are written to reflect the students true needs, wants and goals, they should help guide the courses the student takes during high school. The reality however, is that not all high schools have programs that will further the career goals of students with disabilities. The most common complaint from students and transition teams is lack of diversity in options for core and elective courses (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). One way to increase diversity in options for our students with disabilities is improving access to career and technical education (Harvey et al., 2019; Shaw, 2008). CTE choices

provides students with the academic and technical skills, knowledge and training necessary to succeed in future careers (CTE General Public Fact Sheet, 2022; Harvey et al., 2019). CTE is a viable option to assist students with disabilities in their goals in transitioning into adulthood and meeting the demands of a 21st century workforce (Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). As discussed, high school dropout rates for students with disabilities are twice that of general education students. California Department of Education reports that students enrolled in California Technical Education (CTE) programs demonstrate significantly higher academic achievement and college readiness compared to their peers. CTE students are far more likely to complete the a-g courses required for admission to California's public colleges and universities, with a completion rate of 57 percent compared to 36 percent among other high school students. Their participation more than doubles the college entrance rate for minority students and increases overall college enrollment rates compared to local and state averages. Research shows that students who complete a rigorous academic core alongside a career concentration achieve test scores equal to or exceeding those of traditional college prep students, are more likely to pursue postsecondary education, maintain higher GPAs in college, and are less likely to drop out during their first year. Additionally, 80 percent of students who take a college prep curriculum combined with rigorous career and technical education (CTE) meet college and career readiness goals, compared to just 63 percent of those who do not take CTE. Nationally, the graduation rate for students concentrating in CTE was 90 percent in 2008, significantly higher than the 75 percent rate for other students. CTE students also outperform state averages in passing the California high school exit exam and graduate on time at a rate of 95 percent—10 percent higher than the state average (California Department of Education, n.d.). These findings highlight the effectiveness of CTE programs in preparing students for both college and career success. Data

shows that students with disabilities are at higher risk for dropping out and CTE data shows that high-risk students are eight to ten times less likely to drop out in the 11th and 12th grades if they enroll in a CTE program (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018).

Despite most stakeholders knowing that CTE options are beneficial and needed for all students, especially students with disabilities, these opportunities do not manifest enough in our students' experience. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), individuals are more likely to engage in and persist through challenges when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Partnering among various stakeholders; including educators, families, employers, and disability service providers, is essential in expanding CTE opportunities, as collaboration fosters a sense of relatedness and support, key drivers of intrinsic motivation (Harvey et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of creating healthy relationships with families and students so that student interest and abilities are taken into consideration when transition planning, further reinforcing autonomy and self-efficacy (Brady et al., 2021). When students are given meaningful opportunities to explore CTE and other elective courses, they not only develop competence in practical skills but also gain a sense of ownership over their education. This alignment between personal interest and skill development enhances motivation, persistence, and long-term success, ultimately leading to higher graduation rates and increased participation in competitive employment (Brady et al., 2021; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Harvey et al., 2019).

When transition planning is not completed adequately, or a district does not have proper supports in place for transition, students suffer in the short and long term (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019). Earlier I discussed a scenario where a moderate student who was working towards a diploma was forced to take district level graduation requirements instead of state

requirements. The motivation behind these requirements is that education should not be gate kept from students with disabilities (Francisco et al., 2020). These students should be given the opportunity to learn with their same aged peers in the same environment as much as possible (IDEA, 2004). This concept works very well for most students with mild disabilities who have an average IQ (85-115), however for borderline students, some of these requirements are often unattainable without significant modifications and lead to increased frustration, loss of intrinsic motivation and poor self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Shaw, 2008; Peltopuro et. al., 2014).

Curriculum modification in particular is a significant predictor of positive academic performance of students with disabilities; meaning, the more students with disabilities are engaged due to modifications, the better their academic performance (Francisco et al., 2020; Shaw, 2008). However, if a student is receiving significant modifications to the curriculum, they cannot earn a diploma (Doll et al., 2013; Thurlow et al., 2002). If our mentioned moderate student is required to take and pass an Algebra 2 course without significant modifications, their motivation and mental health could be impacted (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Shaw, 2008). Children with learning disabilities are four and a half times more likely to have a mental health problem than children without a learning disability (NCES, 2023; Shaw, 2008). High School students with disabilities reported significantly higher levels of interest, and devotion to graduating when they were given choice in content courses and elective courses that would benefit them later in life (Cavendish et al., 2019; Shaw, 2008). SDT research shows that, similar to the general population, autonomy support, autonomous motivation, and satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are important, connected concepts for people with intellectual disabilities with a mild to borderline level of functioning in order to be satisfied.

Promoting student motivation is imperative in them completing their course of study (Frielink et al., 2018).

Inclusion

There are significant benefits to both disabled, and non-disabled students when they are taught in the same environment (Francisco et al., 2020; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Inclusion is an emotionally charged conversation that has evolved in education over the last three decades. While there is not a universally accepted definition, the general philosophy of inclusion is an aim to maximize the participation of all students in a general education setting and to minimize exclusionary practices as often as possible (Booth, 2005; Booth et al., 2006). The way inclusion is practiced can vary dramatically between cultures and educational systems (Dyson, 1999). In the United States, there has been a push for inclusion since the 1970s in some fashion, but in the last two decades, education has seen a more dramatic push to full inclusion for all courses and all students (Dyson, 1999; Francisco et al., 2020; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). In 2016, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) shared Article 24, and called for all countries to implement fully inclusive education systems as soon as possible (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). However, since then, several countries have decided not to follow that guideline for different reasons, most notably that there is not enough data to prove that all students learn best in the same setting. Currently, partial segregation for students with disabilities is happening in 45% of other United Nation Countries (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020).

Practitioners in the United States education system often feel that academic leaders in central positions have been impractical about the challenges faced by many students, teachers and parents of children with special education needs and disabilities when it comes to full inclusion (Dyson, 1999; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). With all of the interpretations of inclusion,

discussion about what is best for all students, combined with district and state graduation requirements, it is often challenging for an IEP transition team to have the flexibility to create a plan that works best for each individual student (Doll et al., 2013; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Special education law requires that the team match the courses and goals to the students transition plan, however oftentimes school districts do not have sufficient choices or flexibility to make that a reality (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Listening to students with BIF who have graduated from a comprehensive high school about their experiences in high school as well as navigating life after high school will give educators some insight into what we are doing that is working, and what areas need to be refined or changed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mertler, 2019).

Graduation Options and Their Impacts on Future Independence

In California there are three types of pathways you can follow to graduate or exit high school. A student can graduate with a general diploma, meaning they have met district graduation requirements without significant modifications. They can earn a Certificate of Completion, which means they completed the required courses the IEP and ITP team decided they required to meet their individual goals, or they can drop out. Over 74 percent of students with disabilities graduate and earn a general diploma, about 10 percent graduate and earn a certificate of completion, a portion of those students attend an Adult Transition Program until they are 21, and about 15 percent dropout of high school (NCES, 2024; Shaw, 2008; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). During transition planning, the team should discuss whether the goals the student and family have requires a diploma or certificate of completion, this will help guide the courses the student takes (IDEA, 2004). Since each student and their disability-related needs are

different, each potential path they could take has different positive and negative implications for these students' futures.

General Diploma

To earn a general diploma from a comprehensive high school, the student must meet that district's graduation requirements without significant modifications to the curriculum (Shaw, 2008). Some students attend adult or alternative high schools; those institutions typically follow state requirements for graduation, which are often lower than district requirements (CDE, 2023). California has a high school graduation rate of 83 percent, however 'graduation' can also include earning a certificate of completion since they too participate in the graduation ceremony, so this data is a bit misleading. About 90 percent of people in America earn a high school diploma before they are 25, which means that some students who drop out do eventually earn a diploma later in life (CDE, 2023). Keeping the student with a BIF in mind, earning a high school diploma can have both positive and negative impacts on the students' life. Earning a high school diploma can increase your employability, for some students it increases their self-esteem, and it can also provide easier access to college programs (Cavendish et al., 2019) However, for some of students with BIF, being on a track to earn a diploma has negative impacts on their future. Some of these students report negative experiences in their high school general education courses. While every student is different, some struggle to feel capable due to a lack of understanding the content, rigid learning expectations of general education teachers, and many students report that they struggle with their self-esteem and mental health when they are pushed to meet general education expectations (Shaw, S. R., 2008; Peltopuro et al., 2014; Wieland & Zitman, 2016). It is also important to consider that just because a student is placed into general education courses and expected to earn a diploma does not necessarily mean they will pass the courses. If students fail

to meet the graduation requirements of that particular district they have the right to fail like any other student. Failing courses will lead them to need to retake the course, missing out on the opportunity to take other electives that could benefit their transition goals. Failing courses also leads to higher levels of stress, losses of intrinsic motivation and withdrawal for the student (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Shaw, S. R., 2008; Peltopuro et al., 2014). Another potential negative impact for students who earn a diploma is that they lose access to Adult Transition Programs and services since those are only available to students who earn a certificate of completion (Thurlow et al., 1997). Adult Transition Programs provide training and instruction to facilitate the transition from public high school into adult programs and supported work placements that are appropriate for the student (Powers et al., 2005).

Certificate of Completion

A certificate of completion is available to students who have an IEP and attend public high schools but are unable to meet the curriculum requirements for a traditional diploma. Certificates of completion are typically reserved for students who have an Intellectual Disability (IQ below 70) (IDEA, 2004). Similar to a diploma, there are different implications that the transition team needs to consider when determining if a certificate of completion is appropriate. A student who earns this certificate will have access to Adult Transition Programs and state services to assist with job training, life skills, and future education opportunities that students who earn a diploma might not have access to. When a student is working towards a certificate of completion the IEP and ITP teams have more flexibility to create a course of study that suits the students needs and transition goals versus attempting to meet graduation requirements (Brady et al., 2021; West, 2009). In a study that included interviews of managers and business owners, they were asked if they preferred a diploma or certificate of completion and the consensus was

that it did not matter at all. What was more important to the managers was the applicant's ability to pass the entry exams and/or complete the required skills needed for the job (Smith & Smith, 2001). A common misconception about a person earning a Certificate of Completion is that they cannot attend college. This is not the case, in fact; all California Community colleges accept students without a high school diploma. While there are several studies that show employers being flexible about a person's high school graduation status, there are some careers that do require a high school diploma, the main career path that this impacts is the military. For a student to join the military they do have to earn a diploma or pass a high school equivalency, also known as the GED test (Smith & Smith, 2001). There are other potential programs or careers that a student without a diploma could be excluded from, but in general there are multiple ways to enter the workforce and higher education for students who earn the certificate of completion (Smith & Smith, 2001; West, 2009).

Dropping out

Data shows that students with disabilities drop out of high school at a rate double to their non-disabled peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Using the lens of Self-Determination Theory it is helpful to study the motivations teenagers have for dropping out of high school so that we can begin to find ways to reduce the amount of students who drop out and to help close the gap that exists between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Teenagers drop out of school for many different reasons, and those reasons are also different for both males and females. The reasons teenagers drop out of high school can be categorized into a 'push', 'pull' or 'fall out' factor (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994; Doll et al., 2013). Push factors can include school-consequences on attendance or discipline, lack of support in academics, unattainable expectations, lack of autonomy, perceived negative connections with

staff (Doll et al., 2013). Pull factors include out-of-school factors like jobs, health needs, and family obligations. Finally, falling out factors refer to disengagement in students not caused by school or outside pulling factors (Doll et al., 2013). U.S schools have historically reported pull out factors being the highest since 1966, until recent studies which are showing push factors to be the highest reported reasons for students dropping out. Researchers believe one rationale for this switch could be due to rising expectations from movements like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) without the required added support that our students with disabilities need (Doll et al., 2013; Shaw, S. R., 2008).

Of the students who are dropping out of high school, about two-thirds of those students are male. Data shows that males often leave high school due to a ‘push’ factor, meaning there is an experience that they are going through in school that is pushing them out of the school environment (Doll et al., 2013; Jordan et al., 1994). This is significant to the conversation about students with disabilities since about two-thirds of students in Special Education are also male. Female students dropout of high school as well, however the data shows that they leave high school due to ‘pull’ factors, meaning there is something outside of school that needs their attention (Doll et al., 2013). While both factors are important to address, as educators, we have more control and an obligation to address the rising ‘push’ factors that are pushing our vulnerable students out of high school early (Doll et al., 2013; Shaw, 2008). This larger cross-section of a diverse student population needs a targeted approach when planning for the future. One way to begin the dialogue with our teenagers about why students with disabilities are leaving high school at double the rate of their peers is to allow these young adults to participate in creating the transition plan that addresses their goals for their own life after high school. SDT research has been consistent for several decades. People, especially teenagers, need to feel a

sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness in the work they do to be motivated enough to persevere (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Since research shows that students with disabilities often have lower expectations about the rewards from graduation, the educators need to assist in making connections between their goals for life after high school and the courses and experiences they have while in high school (Cameto, et al., 2004). This increases students' motivation to participate in courses that were intentionally chosen to support those goals, and creates a sense of belonging that will promote retention and success after high school (Doll et al., 2013; Cavendish et al., 2019; Shaw, 2008).

While it seems counterintuitive, for some students, there are positive outcomes for dropping out of high school. Students with BIF who are facing these 'push' factors do not feel supported and often have lower self-esteem or other mental health concerns that impact their motivation to complete high school (Doll et al., 2023; Shaw, 2008). Removing themselves from school could have positive impacts on their mental health (Peltopuro et al., 2014). Just like your typical teenager, many students who have BIF want to work and earn money to help support themselves and their families. They are motivated to start CTE or other training programs and leaving school allows them to begin this journey sooner (Harvey et al., 2019; Peltopuro et al., 2014). For these as well as the other reasons discussed, it is imperative that ITP teams have the authority and support within our systems to create a transition plan including course of study requirements that are useful for students transition to adulthood (Cameto, et al., 2004; Harvey et al., 2019; Peltopuro et al., 2014).

Summary

Transitioning from high school into adulthood and the workforce is an exciting and often challenging time for all young people. The high school experience is one milestone that helps all

people explore and plan for their future (Suk et al., 2020). Having a support system throughout this time is important for everyone, but imperative for students with BIF. Self-determination is a path towards listening to what our students need and seeing how they thrive. Since public education and its systems were not created to be individualized or responsive to each student's needs, students with disabilities need advocates to share their experiences and struggles with the leaders that are creating the benchmarks and requirements they are forced to meet (Yell et al., 1998). Allowing for differentiation in the courses and requirements to graduate high school is necessary to meet the needs of our diverse student population. When students feel competent, connected and included in the decisions about their life and future, they are more motivated to complete the benchmarks associated with reaching their goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Not allowing for individualized transition plans that include appropriate course selections that are attainable and meaningful to these students creates barriers to learning, mental health struggles, lower future career and education options and can have significant fiscal impacts on a community (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Harvey et al., 2019; Shaw, 2008).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study aimed to understand the implications of individualized transition planning and how that process shaped the transition to adulthood for students with borderline intellectual functioning (BIF) who earned a diploma. Listening to the lived experiences of these students offered insights into closing the opportunity and achievement gap that had been created. Using former students' personal experiences, the study sought to gain understanding into how individualized transition planning, along with the courses required and offered and other barriers impacted students with BIF in their transition to adulthood and the workforce up to four years after graduation. Using the tenets of Self-Determination Theory, this study explored how perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness in individualized transition planning could enhance motivation, self-efficacy, and long-term success for students with BIF.

This chapter discusses the overall research design used to gather, analyze, and present data in this study. It also describes the setting and participants for the research, as well as data collection and analysis methods.

Research Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design, incorporating cross-case analysis to examine the experiences of high school graduates with BIF. Case study methodology proved particularly useful for gaining contextualized, in-depth understanding of complex educational experiences, especially when focusing on a specific population within a real-world setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018). By analyzing multiple individual cases and then conducting a cross-case comparison, this design allowed for the identification of both unique and recurring themes across participants, deepening insights into how course pathways and transition supports shaped students' postsecondary outcomes.

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling based on criteria established by the study. These documents were accessed as part of my professional responsibilities as an Education Specialist, following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals from the academic institution. Once approval was granted, recruitment letters (Appendix A) were sent to eligible former students. If no responses were received within two weeks, a follow-up strategy was employed, such as a second mailing or outreach through community networks and social media. Once participants agreed to participate, I reached out to them by phone or email to schedule semi-structured interviews. A brief pre-interview conversation (Appendix C) helped build rapport and gathered basic background information. Confirmation of the interview date and time followed (Appendix B). These interviews provided rich, narrative data centered on the participants' perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the context of their high school transition experiences.

In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted on each participant's high school transcript, Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), and transition-related goals. This review allowed for examination of the alignment between intended transition plans and actual course-taking patterns. The use of both interviews and document review supported triangulation and enhanced the credibility of findings, essential for a robust cross-case analysis.

The qualitative approach employed here followed an inductive, flexible, and emergent process, allowing for adaptation to the diverse and nuanced experiences that surfaced (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As I interviewed graduates who had vastly different experiences both during and after high school, it was essential to remain responsive to their narratives. This adaptability ensured that findings were grounded in the participants' realities rather than imposed frameworks.

This study was grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are foundational to human motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT offered a critical lens for understanding how transition supports either facilitated or hindered the development of self-efficacy among students with BIF. A case study approach was especially appropriate in this context, as it enabled exploration of the subjective meaning participants assigned to their experiences, and how their perceived agency, or lack thereof, shaped their outcomes (Holquist et al., 2023; Yin, 2018).

Through in-depth case analysis followed by cross-case comparison, this design uncovered individual and systemic factors influencing postsecondary transitions for students with BIF. This methodological approach aligned with the study's goals of producing localized, actionable insights that could inform more equitable and effective transition planning practices in high schools.

Setting and Context

This research focused on former high school graduates from a single public high school in Southern California. To protect participant confidentiality, the school was referred to using the pseudonym Stars Hollow High School. The school currently serves approximately 3,380 students, with 11.5 percent, roughly 388 students identified as students with disabilities. Based on general population statistics and the distribution of IQ scores along the bell curve, approximately 14 percent of individuals were estimated to fall into the BIF range. Applying this estimate to the special education population at Stars Hollow High School, it could be inferred that around 50 students each year fell within the BIF range.

I selected this site not only because of its size and demographic diversity but also because of having worked there for over a decade as an Education Specialist. The long-standing

professional experience provided in-depth knowledge of the school's graduation requirements, transition planning structures, and how these were applied in practice. This firsthand experience enabled mapping of the institutional context and understanding of how policies and support services intersected with the lived experiences of students exhibiting BIF. It also allowed for identification of the specific challenges and opportunities within the transition planning process that might not be readily apparent to an outside observer.

Stars Hollow High School had undergone several significant structural and curricular shifts over the five years preceding the study. During this time, the school had raised its graduation requirements and increasingly emphasized A–G aligned courses and college-bound pathways. While these efforts had promoted academic rigor, they had also been accompanied by the reduction of "separate setting" classes that traditionally served students with disabilities who faced challenges in general education settings. These changes had complex implications for students with BIF, who often required more individualized and flexible pathways to thrive in high school and beyond.

The existing relationships with administrators, teachers, and support staff at the school facilitated access to key stakeholders and essential archival data, making this a particularly strong site for a comprehensive and contextually rich case study. Working within a familiar setting not only enhanced the ability to build rapport with participants, but also sharpened the ability to notice subtle but important patterns in how transition planning was experienced and implemented. This depth of contextual knowledge allowed for interpretation of findings with greater precision and for generation of realistic, actionable recommendations for improving postsecondary transition practices, both at this site and in similar school contexts.

This high school also had a grant and team of employees who worked directly with students who had IEPs on transition related goals. The Workability program was funded and administered by the California Department of Education through the Special Education Department. The program offered students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) the opportunity to complete their high school education while also obtaining marketable job skills. WorkAbility provided high school students with an understanding of job seeking and job keeping skills. WorkAbility I was initiated in November 1981 as a pilot project to test the concept of work experience for youth with disabilities and continues to successfully conduct interagency coordination of services. The WorkAbility program at this site also kept in contact with graduates for up to three years after they had left high school. They continued to provide support and resources for students with disabilities on an as needed basis. Because of this connection, finding and connecting with participants was more accessible for this research.

Participants and Sampling

For this research study, participants were intentionally selected using purposeful and then homogeneous sampling (Maxwell, 2013; Mertler, 2019). Purposeful sampling ensured that all participants were former students who graduated with a diploma and received Special Education services. Homogeneous sampling was applied because all participants shared the same defining characteristic of borderline intellectual functioning (BIF).

The participants had all graduated with a diploma at least two years prior to the interviews, maintained an IEP throughout all four years of high school, and had IQ scores between 70 and 85. The use of criterion-based selection was crucial to ensure that the participant sample aligned with the specific purpose of the study (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Since the focus of this study was on how former students with BIF utilized transition

support to reach their goals after high school, the sample consisted of 7 students from Stars Hollow High School. This sample size ensured the collection of an information-rich data set while still reaching the point of saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

IQ scores were identified through each participant's multidisciplinary psychological report, which was accessed as part of my professional responsibilities as an Education Specialist and in accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals. However, it is important to note that in California, the legal precedent established by *Larry P. v. Riles* (1979) prohibits the use of IQ testing with Black students in public school settings due to the historically biased and discriminatory application of such assessments (MacMillan & Forness, 1998). This legal constraint means that Black students who may meet the criteria for BIF cannot ethically or legally be included in this study if their IQ scores are not documented, which may result in limited demographic representation of Black students within the sample. Despite this structural limitation beyond the researcher's control, the study proceeded with available participants whose IQ documentation was legally and ethically permissible.

My relationship with participants varied. For some students, I had a close working relationship with both them and their families, particularly if I had served as their case manager. For others, the relationship was limited but familiar, as they had been in classes I taught. For students and families with whom I had no prior working relationship, names were obtained from other case managers. I established initial contact via email and phone to build rapport and create connections, either by introducing their former case manager or by identifying other shared interests and connections.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data consists of words, quotes, and visuals that provide rich, descriptive narratives of individuals' lived experiences. This data can be gathered through a variety of methods, including interviews, and document reviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mertler, 2019). In this qualitative multiple case study, multiple sources of data were used, including semi-structured interview transcripts and archival documents such as each participant's Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), transcript, and multidisciplinary psychological evaluation as points of data collection.

All students with an IEP had a multidisciplinary psychological report that was updated every three years, which included current and historical testing data, including IQ scores. Once eligible students were identified, a recruitment letter (Appendix A) was sent inviting them to participate in the study.

Once the participant agreed to participate, I gathered the student's high school transcript and IEP documents for each participant. The student transcript and IEP documents served as key sources of data to examine the alignment between planned transition activities and the student's actual postsecondary outcomes. By analyzing these records, it was possible to assess whether the documented transition goals, course of study, elective choices, and vocational training opportunities were intentionally designed to support the student's progress toward adulthood. These documents provided concrete evidence of what transition services were planned and implemented, and whether they corresponded with the student's stated post-graduation goals. For example, if a student's IEP included a goal related to employment in a specific field, the transcript could reveal whether elective courses or vocational experiences aligned with that objective. This analysis directly informed Research Question B: "In what ways did specific

transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood?" and offered insight into how effectively the school supported the student's preparation for life after high school.

Using archival documentation as a source of evidence provided several advantages. These records were unobtrusive, as they were not created specifically for this study, and they could be reviewed repeatedly to ensure consistency and depth in analysis (Yin, 2018). Additionally, these documents often contained precise information, including names, dates, course selections, and detailed records of transition goals and services received. To protect participant confidentiality, all identifying information was removed or coded during data collection and analysis. Collecting documents that spanned all four years of each student's high school experience offered a comprehensive understanding of their academic pathways and transition planning, as well as the alignment between documented goals and actual outcomes across multiple settings and time points (Yin, 2018).

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed for future coding and were used to collect richly descriptive data about former students' experiences, perceptions, and outcomes after high school, capturing their voices (Holquist et al., 2023; Yin, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate data collection method for a case study because they provided a balance between structure and flexibility, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while ensuring consistency in interviews (Yin, 2018). It was appropriate within the context of self-determination because it allowed participants to provide personal accounts of their support during transition, motivation, and challenges in their own words (Holquist et al., 2023; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Yin, 2018). Additionally, semi-structured interviewing provided me with the opportunity to probe deeper into responses, seeking clarification of meaning and

uncovering things that perhaps would not be uncovered through more structured questioning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mertler, 2019). This was flexible enough that the data collected was rich in information and contextually meaningful, which was beneficial in answering the research questions and learning how young adults with BIF navigated life after high school.

I conducted one-on-one, 25-40 minute, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted in person or virtually on Zoom depending on what was more convenient for the participant. Interviews are a form of conversation (Mertler, 2019), and semi-structured interviews provided me with the opportunity to use a combination of predetermined questions while also allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mertler, 2019). Probing questions, or follow-up inquiries, built rapport and helped get more details from previous responses. They also helped me make connections between emerging themes and further analysis. In-person interviews sometimes allowed for better rapport and trust to be built. However, virtual interviews enhanced student participation by removing obstacles such as travel expenses. Additionally, they allowed for use of technological tools that can assist with transcription (Lareau, 2021).

Because this study relied in part on retrospective interviews, participants' recollections of their high school experiences could be influenced by recall bias; memories may be incomplete, distorted, or reshaped by time and subsequent life events. To mitigate this concern, several strategies were employed: member checking was used to validate interpretations with participants, and document triangulation through transcripts, ITPs, and high school transcripts was conducted to corroborate and contextualize interview data. This multi-method approach ensured that participants' narratives were grounded in concrete evidence and that interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences rather than relying solely on memory.

The interview sessions were transcribed using Otter.ai regardless of interview location, and I also recorded interviews. During the 25-40 minute interviews I utilized the questions from the interview protocol (Appendix D) related to Self-Determination to help answer the research question and understand the young adults' perception of transition related support during high school and their current life situation. Interview questions were organized around the three SDT constructs defined in Chapter 2. Because the study used semi-structured interviews, these questions served as a flexible guide, allowing for adaptation and follow-up prompts tailored to each participant's unique experiences and personal narrative (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mertler, 2019).

Data Analysis and Procedures

Qualitative research follows an inductive approach, meaning that data collection and analysis occur simultaneously. I acted as the primary instrument, remaining flexible and responsive as themes began to emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Once data was collected, it was carefully analyzed in order to answer the research questions guiding the study. The first set of data to be collected and analyzed was archival documents related to each student's high school experience. These documents included the student's multidisciplinary psychological report, academic transcript, and Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), all of which were part of the student's special education record.

To identify appropriate participants for the study, I began by reviewing psychological reports created by the IEP team during the student's time in high school. These comprehensive reports were updated every three years and typically included cognitive and academic testing, social-emotional assessments, educational and medical histories, parent and student interviews,

classroom observations, and input from current teachers. Psychological reports confirmed each participant's IQ within the BIF range.

Once the participant pool was established, I analyzed each student's ITP and transcript to determine how well their documented high school experiences aligned with their postsecondary transition goals. Specifically, I examined whether the transition goals outlined in the ITP were supported by the course of study indicated on the transcript and whether the services and recommendations provided by the IEP team were implemented. The goal of this analysis was to trace the connection between what was planned and what was executed during high school and to assess whether these actions contributed meaningfully to the student's ability to pursue their goals in adulthood later during the interview process.

The document analysis involved extracting relevant data points such as stated transition goals (e.g., employment, vocational training, college), recommended supports, and the actual courses completed. I used additional rounds of qualitative coding to compare these elements across students, looking for patterns, consistencies, or gaps in how transition planning was carried out. This analysis helped answer whether students' high school experiences, both planned and enacted, facilitated progress toward their intended postsecondary outcomes, thus providing deeper insight into the effectiveness of transition supports for students with BIF.

Once document analysis was completed, I began analyzing the semi-structured interviews. After each interview, I reviewed the transcripts while listening to audio and made corrections as needed. They took shorthand notes on key aspects of the data using open coding. I remained open to any information that could prove valuable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, I maintained shorthand journals, or researcher memos, to track observations and potential focus areas for future interviews (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I used

thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to autonomy, motivation, and post-secondary navigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thematic coding involved assigning shorthand designations such as words, phrases, to specific aspects of the data, which aided in retrieval and analysis. These codes served as markers that captured the meaning behind participants' responses, and highlighting meaningful insights from the transcribed interviews. In qualitative research, categories emerged by grouping related codes that reflected common patterns, allowing for a structured and systematic interpretation of the data. Through this process, I identified and organized themes that provided a deeper understanding of how young adults with BIF experienced and utilized transition support. As themes emerged from the interviews, I asked probing questions and encouraged participants to provide feedback on interpretations of their experiences and perceptions to help maintain an honest and accurate representation of the participants' voices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Involving students in the inductive data analysis aligned with Self-determination theory, as it invited participants to share their thoughts and feelings about the system they were part of and contribute any suggestions they may have had (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Data analysis for this study followed a thematic analysis approach, guided by the work of Merriam and Tisdell (2015). All semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using computer-assisted transcription software to ensure accuracy and consistency. Once transcriptions were complete, I imported the interview data into qualitative analysis software to assist with organizing, coding, and systematically analyzing the data. The coding process began with open coding, in which I carefully read each transcript and applied initial codes to meaningful segments of text. During this phase, I used a combination of deductive and inductive coding strategies: codes were developed both from theoretical frameworks, particularly

Self-Determination Theory, and from concepts that emerged directly from participants' narratives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). To guide this process, I constructed a codebook that defined each code and included examples to support consistent application.

As coding progressed, I transitioned to axial coding, which involved identifying relationships among open codes and grouping them into broader conceptual categories. These categories were compared across participants to identify patterns and variations in experiences. Researcher memos and reflective notes were reviewed throughout the process to ensure ongoing reflexivity and capture analytic insights as they developed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016).

The final step involved synthesizing these categories into overarching themes that reflected the central ideas emerging from the data. These themes were evaluated based on their relevance to the research questions and their ability to illuminate how students with BIF navigated high school and transitioned to adulthood. This type of analysis of emergent themes allowed for a rich, layered understanding of participant experiences and supported a flexible, yet systematic, interpretation of the qualitative data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). Table 2 below describes a summary and overview of the research design for this case study.

Table 2*Overview of Research Design*

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Data Sources and Purpose</i>	<i>Alignment with RQ</i>
1. Document Analysis Part A and B	A. I reviewed Multidisciplinary Psychological Reports from graduated students to gather a participant pool that met the BIF requirement. B. I analyzed those students' ITPs and transcripts to ensure they met the other participant requirements of having been enrolled at Stars Hollow High School for four years and graduating with a diploma. I also analyzed whether any of the students' courses aligned with their transition goals, as well as other transition activities and goals.	B. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood?
2. Initial Contact and Introduction	I utilized purposeful sampling to select participants and made contact with the potential participants through email and then followed up with a phone call/text. Initial conversations with potential participants was to build a relationship, collect current education/career status as well as collect and begin to set up a time for the more formal interview.	
3. Interview	I utilized the interview protocol related to Self-Determination to conduct a 25-40 min semi-structured interview with participants. The interview was recorded and transcribed.	A. In what ways did their sense of self-determination (or lack thereof) impact their motivation and ability to navigate life after high school? C. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?

Trustworthiness

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the study's findings accurately represent the participants' experiences and the

realities of the context. It is established through strategies such as triangulation, member checking, rich thick description, audit trails, and researcher reflexivity, which collectively enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research. Ensuring trustworthiness within qualitative research involves carrying out the study in an ethical manner. One way to do that was to establish a plan for the way in which data was collected, analyzed and interpreted as well as how the data was presented and to follow through with that plan as best as possible. Another way qualitative researchers could ensure trustworthiness was by explaining potential biases that could conflict with the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). One bias or threat that I identified a need to be concerned with was in the "reflexivity" category. The fact that I was a researcher interacting with participants meant I was part of the study. How they interacted with me specifically influenced their responses, good or bad. The students I was interviewing had already graduated, but they most likely still had ties within the community and could still potentially be utilizing resources within the district. However, it was still important that students understood they were safe from negative repercussions and that their information would be anonymous. This addressed reflexivity threats for students who felt they must alter their responses with a district employee. Students may not have felt comfortable sharing negative experiences if there was a fear of repercussion (Maxwell, 2013). I included information in the initial invitation to participate and provided assurance at the beginning of the interview process of their anonymity.

For some of these students, I might have had a close working relationship with them and their families. My relationship with the family could have had an impact regarding their honesty about current circumstances regarding further education or employment. I also needed to make sure my writing stayed focused on gathering information about a 'thing' versus proving a

connection between electives and future ‘success’. The focus remained on IF they were provided the opportunity to take courses that aligned with their transition goals or not and separately what they are doing now and if that matches any of their goals. I felt that this particular group of our students with IEPs are negatively impacted by the mandated course selection as well as the elective choices they are offered. I don’t see many examples of alignment with the Individual Transition Plan that the IEP team creates during annual meetings and the courses the students are taking to graduate. Being aware of my own biases and making sure to collect the students’ experience will be important. My role as the researcher was to explain an experience of a particular group of students throughout their ITP implementation to their actual transition into adulthood, not discuss how that impacts me as a teacher. When appropriate, as themes develop I asked probing questions and invited participants to comment on my interpretations of their student experiences and perceptions to assist in validation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

To mitigate potential threats to the validity of this study, several strategies were implemented during the document analysis phase. Using high school transcripts and Individualized Transition Plans (ITPs), the analysis focused on extracting key data points such as transition goals (e.g., employment, vocational training, or college), recommended supports, and the actual courses completed. By comparing each student’s ITP with their transcript, I evaluated whether their course of study aligned with the goals established by the IEP team. This comparison offered valuable insight into how effectively transition planning supported students in working toward their postsecondary objectives. One advantage of using documentation was that it was static and not influenced by memory bias or emotional interpretation, which helped ensure that the data collected was honest and reliable. When combined with the students’

interview responses, this method also allowed for data triangulation, increasing the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Maxwell, 2013).

Using open ended questions as much as possible was also a strategy to help lessen bias. Avoiding leading questions and having my interview questions screened by others and then making revisions to remove bias in the questioning or change the wording as appropriate aided in consistency and the removal of biases. I also collaborated with other case managers to review transcriptions when making assumptions or conclusions as much as possible. Since Special Education is sort of a school within a school in some senses, I imagined most of the families I interacted with would have a positive view of those interactions. Of course, some families could have had a terrible interaction with the district and the IEP process which could potentially have impacted their responses.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting interviews with participants who have BIF, it was essential to approach data collection with intentionality, empathy, and care. Individuals in this population may have experienced cognitive or communication-related challenges; therefore, interview questions were phrased using clear, accessible language and delivered at a pace that allowed for adequate processing and thoughtful response. This approach was designed to foster a comfortable environment in which participants could engage meaningfully and without undue pressure.

Although all participants in this study had documented disabilities, they were legally recognized as non-conserved adults. As such, they retained full autonomy and legal capacity to make decisions concerning their education, employment, healthcare, and daily lives. It was important to challenge the ableist assumption that individuals with cognitive or intellectual disabilities were incapable of articulating their own experiences. Excluding these individuals

from research that directly affected them not only undermined their agency but also perpetuated systemic inequities in educational and policy-making contexts. This study was grounded in the belief that the perspectives of individuals with disabilities were both valid and necessary, and that their lived experiences should be centered in research aimed at improving educational practice and transition planning.

Drawing from over a decade of professional experience working with this student population, I remained attentive to both verbal and non-verbal cues throughout the interview process to ensure participants felt respected, safe, and supported. In some cases, prior relationships, such as having served as a teacher or case manager, aided in establishing trust. However, care was taken to maintain ethical boundaries and ensure that participation was entirely voluntary. These considerations were central to conducting ethically responsible and inclusive research that honored the dignity and autonomy of all participants.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

To protect participant identity, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts, field notes, and reporting. Identifiable information including names of schools, teachers, or family members was omitted or anonymized to preserve confidentiality. Data was securely stored in accordance with the University of California, San Diego's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines and data protection standards. Digital files were housed on encrypted, password-protected servers, and any hard copies (such as handwritten notes) were stored in locked cabinets accessible only to me.

Prior to beginning the study, IRB approval was obtained from both UCSD and the participating school district. All study procedures, including recruitment, verbal consent, data collection, and storage, were reviewed to ensure they met ethical standards for research involving human subjects. Only the information directly relevant to the study's criteria and

research questions were collected and analyzed. Records used to determine eligibility such as transcripts, psychological reports, IEPs, and Individualized Transition Plans (ITPs), were reviewed privately and kept separate from other research materials. At no point was personally identifying information shared in publications or presentations. These steps were intended to ensure that all aspects of participant privacy, confidentiality, and ethical responsibility were maintained throughout the research process.

Given that I was also a teacher at the school site where the study was being conducted, potential conflicts of interest were addressed by excluding current students on my caseload, clearly communicating the voluntary nature of participation, and ensuring that my professional and research roles remained distinct throughout the study. These steps were intended to ensure that all aspects of participant privacy, confidentiality, and ethical responsibility were maintained throughout the research process.

Mitigating Researcher Bias

Given my longstanding role as a staff member at Stars Hollow High School, there were existing relationships with some of the participants. While this familiarity could foster openness and trust, it also introduced the potential for response bias. To mitigate this, the voluntary nature of participation was clearly communicated, and participants were assured that there were no consequences for sharing honest and critical feedback. If I had a close working relationship with a participant or their family, particular care was taken to center their lived experiences rather than validating personal interpretations.

The aim of this research was not to evaluate the existing school system or revisit my own teaching history, but rather to elevate the voices of former students with BIF and ensure their perspectives on transition support were accurately and respectfully represented. To reduce

researcher bias and enhance the credibility of findings, several strategies were employed. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to document personal assumptions and reflect on potential influence during data collection and analysis. Peer debriefing was used to obtain critical feedback on emerging themes, and member checking was implemented to validate that interpretations were aligned with participants' intended meanings.

These strategies, along with strict de-identification protocols and oversight from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), helped ensure the trustworthiness, transparency, and integrity of the research process.

IRB Approval and Study Procedure

Prior to data collection, this study was submitted to the Office of IRB Administration at the University of California San Diego for review and approval. Approval was granted in September of 2025. After approval, I collaborated with members of the Special Education team to identify potential participants based on specific selection criteria. Eligibility was confirmed through a review of each student's academic transcript, psychological report, IEP, and ITP. Once a participant pool was created, eligible former students were contacted via phone and email and sent a formal recruitment message (Appendix A) that described the study procedures and invited them to participate in an interview in accordance with the approved IRB protocol.

Positionality

I was born in a small town in Michigan and raised by my single mother in the Northern Kentucky/Greater Cincinnati region. I am an only child, and we lived most of my childhood with extremely limited financial resources. My mother worked incredibly hard, often holding two or three jobs so that we could meet basic needs. Over the course of about eight years, she also attended a university and earned her bachelor's degree in Social Work and Mental Health. I

remember sitting in the hallways outside her lecture classes coloring, or trying to listen to the professor's voice through the door. During that time, she worked at a Catholic Children's Home, where I spent many days and nights alongside the children she cared for. Through conversations with my mother and my friendships with the children who lived there, I was exposed early to a range of educational, behavioral, and mental health challenges. Growing up around young people from very different and often traumatic backgrounds, and watching how they adapted, or struggled to adapt, to a new environment gave me a distinctive perspective on behavior, resilience, and school-related difficulties. I rode the bus, shared meals, and did homework with them, and because I always knew I wanted to be a teacher, I eagerly helped them with their schoolwork and, at times, created "extra assignments" for us to do together.

As I grew older and entered high school, I chose every elective that was related to teaching. The course that had the greatest impact on me was Peer Mentoring. Over four years, I worked with students across the mild to moderate and extensive support needs spectrum. These experiences, combined with my time at the Children's Home, led me, perhaps inevitably, to special education. As I moved through my teacher preparation program, I began to recognize my preferences, strengths, and areas for growth in working with students.

It is important to note that I personally loved school. I found the academic work engaging, I loved to read, I made friends easily, and I had strong relationships with my teachers. Even while living on my own and working full time by my senior year of high school, I remember my academic experiences in high school and college as overwhelmingly positive. During my undergraduate practicums, however, I realized that my "why" as an educator was most clearly expressed with students whose experiences of school were very different from my own. I gravitated toward students who were struggling academically, who seemed unhappy, or

who were disruptive and disconnected from their learning. These students reminded me of the children I had grown up with at the Children's Home and the peers I had supported in the peer mentoring program. Building authentic connections and relationships with them felt natural, because I had, in many ways, been practicing those skills throughout my life.

In my undergraduate coursework, we frequently wrote about the question, "What is your why?" At first, my responses felt similar to those of many prospective teachers. Over time, as I gained more experience in classrooms, my motivation crystallized: I wanted to help students who had not always loved school find at least some part of school that felt meaningful, welcoming, and worthwhile.

I now work as an Education Specialist at a high school and have been working with students with behavioral and academic disabilities for more than 15 years. Currently, I co-teach in a general education Biology course that is a graduation requirement. Many of the students I serve feel that they have little control over their lives for a range of reasons. I see my role as helping them regain a sense of agency and, in the process, supporting them in discovering interests and passions. Each year, I implement and case manage IEPs for approximately 25 students with disabilities. For high school students, a central component of the IEP is the transition plan. I collaborate with students, families, teachers, and other service providers to develop plans for high school coursework and to arrange additional activities that may support students in reaching their postschool goals. The hope is that students can take courses that expand their thinking and exposure to multiple academic and vocational pathways, and that these experiences will help them form a clearer sense of what they want to do after high school. As a case manager, it is my responsibility to help students articulate a plan for their lives and to advocate for the courses and experiences they need to move toward those goals.

There are, however, persistent challenges in this process. Not all students have access to courses that would best support them in adulthood. IEP teams often face limited options, both in required academic courses and in electives. Frequently, the courses that are available do not align with students' goals, or they are not taught at a level that is accessible to some students with disabilities. Time is another significant constraint. Many students require additional services or remedial classes, which fill their schedules and leave little room for elective courses that might provide meaningful preparation for adult life.

When I began my doctoral program and started exploring possible research topics, I repeatedly returned to transition planning, driven by the question, "Is there anything we are doing that is truly helping these students when they leave high school?" Drawing on the theories and frameworks I encountered in my program, I began to identify structural barriers and potential areas of inquiry that could illuminate the disconnect between transition plans on paper and students' actual experiences after graduation. This study reflects my commitment to using my knowledge and professional experience to contribute to transition-focused research, particularly for students with moderate support needs, such as those with BIF.

Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions of this research study consist of the accessibility to participants data given my role within Stars Hollow High School. Since I have worked in several different classrooms and taught different Special Education electives, I often have a relationship with most of our students. Given the professional relationship the students/parents may have with myself could influence the information that is given to me. Additionally, it may be possible reaching participants could be a challenge as some may have moved or may not actively utilize their

personal emails. This would have a negative impact on the research as in a case study it is imperative to present a comprehensive picture of the case (Creswell, 2018). A final assumption that could be given is the focus on a single case study, some may argue the outcomes derived from this research study may not be as generalizable to other situations.

Delimitations

A delimitation is the constraints of a research study enforced by the researcher (Mertler, 2019). This case study focuses on one group of historically marginalized students, students in Special Education, and does not examine other student population groups. Second, this research is focused on Students within Special Education who have an IQ that places them in the borderline intellectual functioning category. Although this study does not encompass all groups within Special Education, it does attribute specific knowledge that could lead to information that would benefit this particular group of students. Examining the experiences of students who have BIF and graduated with a diploma can give immense insight into ways that an IEP team could support students and families in their transition to adulthood.

Conclusion

This research employed a qualitative multiple case study design, incorporating cross-case analysis grounded in Self-Determination Theory to investigate the lived experiences of students with borderline intellectual functioning during their transition to adulthood. The methodological choices; purposeful and homogeneous sampling, document analysis paired with semi-structured interviews, and thematic coding guided by both theory-driven and inductive approaches, form a coherent package designed to answer questions about how and why students experienced transition planning, not to measure outcomes or generalize across populations. Because the research aimed to understand the subjective meaning participants assigned to their experiences

and how their perceived agency shaped their postsecondary outcomes, a qualitative approach was essential (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The combination of archival data and participant narratives enabled triangulation and depth, while the cross-case analysis allowed for identification of both recurring patterns and unique experiences within this specific population. Ethical safeguards including anonymity, member checking, and researcher reflexivity, ensured that the voices of students with disabilities were centered respectfully and authentically throughout the process.

With this methodological foundation established, the following chapters present the findings from the document analysis and interviews, organized around the study's research questions and grounded in Self-Determination Theory. Chapter 4 introduces the individual cases and key themes that emerged across participants' experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness during high school transition planning and in their postsecondary lives.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this study by exploring the lived experiences of students with borderline intellectual functioning (BIF), with the goal of identifying how self-determination factors influence their academic engagement and long-term outcomes after graduation. By examining the participants' narratives, this chapter highlights the ways in which motivation, autonomy, competence, goal-setting, and educational support shaped their experiences in high school and impacted their perceived ability to persist toward their goals after graduation. Understanding these findings provides insight into how schools can better address the needs of students with BIF and strengthen systems of support that promote academic success.

During the semi-structured interviews (Appendix D), participants were asked questions designed to gather insight into their high school experiences and the transition support they received through their individualized education programs. Interview questions explored how participants described their course requirements, elective options, and transition activities, as well as the extent to which self-determination influenced their choices, motivation, and perceived opportunities during and after high school (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Participants also reflected on whether transition planning efforts made by their IEP teams had been beneficial in supporting their independence and ability to navigate adulthood. Their perspectives on these efforts guided the analysis of how they interpreted the relevance and impact of their transition planning experiences, and they informed the research question and sub-questions that framed the findings presented in this chapter.

The research questions for this study were grounded in the interest in closing the opportunity and achievement gap for students with disabilities as well as the need to better

understand how transition planning practices served students with BIF, a population often overlooked in special education policy and practice. The questions reflected the core purpose of this study, which was to explore the lived experiences of young adults with BIF as they transitioned from high school into adulthood and to examine the role that self-determination and individualized transition planning played in shaping their outcomes. By aligning the research questions with the identified gap in the literature; particularly the mismatch between current educational structures and the specific needs of students with BIF, this study generated findings that may inform more individualized, inclusive and supportive transition practices.

This study was conducted at Stars Hollow High School, the setting described in Chapter 3. The seven participants who form this cross-case analysis are introduced below:

Table 3

Demographics

Participant	IQ	Age	Completed Program/Certification after High School	Full-time/Part-time Current Employment	Living Arrangement
Yessica	72	21	No	Yes; Part-time, retail	At home
Xander	83	20	Not yet; Currently Enrolled @ Community College for Radiology Tech	No	At home
Blossom	74	21	Yes; cosmetology certificate	Yes; part-time, retail	At home
Lee	76	22	No	No	At home
Bobby	78	21	Yes; certified technician through Valvoline	Yes; full-time, car mechanics	At home
Gerry	80	21	Yes; Carpentry Certificate, Community College	Yes; full-time, City of San Marcos	At home
Declan	77	20	Not yet; currently enrolled in Electrician Certification at a local Trade School	Yes; part-time, with dad, construction	At home

As shown in table 3, the participant group consisted of seven young adults with BIF who had previously graduated from high school with a diploma. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 22 years old, with the majority being 21 years old. All participants had IQ scores within the borderline intellectual functioning range, ranging from 72 to 83. In terms of postsecondary participation, four participants had completed a program or certification following high school, two participants were currently enrolled in a program but had not yet completed it, and two participants had not completed any additional program or certification. Employment status varied across participants, with five participants currently employed either part-time or full-time, and two participants not currently employed at the time of data collection. Among those employed, work experiences included retail, cosmetology, construction, automotive/mechanical work, and municipal employment. All seven participants reported living at home, indicating that none of the participants had transitioned into independent living arrangements at the time of the interviews.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data analysis in this study involved an iterative, qualitative approach that integrated document analysis with in-depth interview coding to address the research questions. I treated each data source as offering a distinct but complementary lens: the IEPs and high school transcripts provided evidence of what was formally planned and documented, while the interviews revealed how participants experienced, interpreted, and acted on those plans in their lives after high school. Across both sources, I used thematic coding to identify patterns within and across cases, moving from initial descriptive codes to more analytic themes aligned with the study's conceptual framework and research questions.

Document analysis was used primarily to address Research Question B: In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood? I conducted a systematic review of each participant's high school transcript and IEP records, coding for features such as transition goals, documented services, course of study, elective and CTE enrollment, work-based learning, and references to agencies or life-skills instruction. Through thematic coding across documents, I examined how these planned activities reflected (or failed to reflect) preparation for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living, and compared these patterns across participants to identify common strengths, gaps, and misalignments.

Interview transcripts were the primary data source for subquestions A and C: how did their sense of self-determination shape their ability to navigate life after high school, and what barriers or gaps they experienced. After verbatim transcription using Otterai coding software, I engaged in multiple rounds of coding, beginning with open codes that captured participants' language about support, choice, relationships, confidence, barriers, and postschool experiences. I then developed more focused, thematic codes related to autonomy, competence, relatedness, transition activities, and systemic constraints. This process allowed me to trace how participants made sense of their IEP and transition planning experiences over time, and to synthesize cross-case themes that spoke to both the overall research question and the specific ways self-determination and structural barriers influenced their transitions into adulthood (See table 2).

Document Analysis

To understand the alignment between transition planning and postsecondary outcomes, I analyzed each participant's Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), high school transcript, and multidisciplinary psychological report. This document review examined whether the transition

goals articulated by the IEP team were supported by concrete course selections and whether the documented pathway matched participants' actual postsecondary experiences. From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, I was particularly interested in whether the transition activities available to students; especially elective coursework, provided meaningful opportunities for autonomy (choice in activities aligned with interests), competence (skill-building relevant to stated goals), and relatedness (connection to mentors or communities of practice). These three psychological needs are foundational to sustained motivation and the ability to follow through on long-term goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The data revealed a mixed picture. While all seven participants articulated clear education and career goals during their ITPs, the alignment between planned transition activities and real-world success was inconsistent. Notably, only two participants (Blossom and Gerry) completed certificate or training programs as planned, while others experienced significant disruptions; dropping out of college programs or shifting entirely away from their stated goals. This gap suggests that while ITPs provided structure and direction, the transition activities themselves, particularly elective coursework, may not have adequately scaffolded participants toward their stated objectives. The concept of insufficient scaffolding was reiterated in the interview data discussed in the following sections.

Table 4*Document Analysis*

Participant Gender Ethnicity	IQ	Education Goal in ITP	Career Goal in ITP	Electives that aligned with goals	Current Post Secondary Education Experience	Current Career Experience
Yessica Female White	72	Complete an associates degree at Local Community College.	Working full time as a nanny or kindergarten teacher	None	Started college, dropped out 2nd year	Part time; retail
Xander Male Hispanic	83	Attempt to gain enrollment in a local Community college to pursue a degree in the medical field.	Pursue a career in the medical field	None	Enrolled in Radiology program	None
Blossom Female Vietnamese	74	Attempt to gain admission in to Local community College Institute of Cosmetology	Gain employment in the cosmetology field	Art	Completed certificate from Institute of Cosmetology	Part time; Retail *Was fired from nail tech job
Lee Male White	76	Attend a community college before tagging into a 4 year school.	Gain employment in the areas of Computer Science and/or Computer Engineering.	Yes, Computer Graphic Design, Computer Science Essentials, Digital Music Film Making	Started at local community college, dropped out the first Semester.	None
Bobby Male Filipino	78	Attend a community college then transfer to university	Unsure, but interested in criminal justice	None	Certified Auto technician through employer	Full-time, car mechanics
Gerry Male Hispanic	80	attending a community college or trade school	Unsure, but likes technology and helping people	None	Completed Carpentry Certificate, local community college	Full-time, City of San Marcos
Declan Male Hispanic	77	Attend Local Community College.	Unsure; Would like to own his own business	None	Currently enrolled in Electrician Certification at UEI	Part-time, with dad, construction

A striking finding in the document analysis is the near-complete absence of elective coursework aligned with career goals; only two participants (Lee and Blossom) had documented

electives matching their ITP objectives. Lee's selection of Computer Graphic Design, Computer Science Essentials, Digital Music, and Film Making courses directly supported his goal of pursuing computer science and engineering, yet he still dropped out of his community college program after one semester (Table 4). Blossom completed her cosmetology certificate after selecting an Art elective, making her one of the few apparent success stories in the dataset; however, she has not been able to maintain stable employment doing nails, the focus of her cosmetology training. This suggests that while electives alone are insufficient to ensure post-secondary persistence, their absence may further undermine students' opportunities to develop domain-specific competence. Interview analysis corroborated this pattern: participants frequently described feeling academically underprepared, uncertain about their chosen fields, or disconnected from the "pathway" they had nominally selected. Within a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) framework, these accounts underscore how competence, the need to feel capable and effective, is critical for sustained engagement and motivation. Participants like Xander, Bobby, Declan, and Gerry, who had no documented electives aligned with their goals, did not simply "appear" unprepared on paper; in interviews, they often articulated confusion, trial-and-error course-taking, or a lack of clear guidance as they entered post-secondary settings. Interestingly, some participants (such as Bobby, Gerry, and Declan) ultimately succeeded in different vocational pathways; becoming a certified auto technician, completing carpentry training, and pursuing electrician certification, suggesting that they eventually found alternative routes to competence and autonomy outside their original ITP goals, even though their high school transition activities did not explicitly prepare them for those outcomes.

The outcomes underscore a critical disconnect between college-preparatory ITP goals and vocational success. Participants who pursued four-year or associate degree pathways (Yessica,

Xander, Lee, Bobby) largely struggled; dropping out or never enrolling, while those who pursued certificate and trade programs (Blossom, Gerry, Declan) or maintained employment (Bobby as a mechanic) achieved more stability. This pattern suggests that transition activities may have overemphasized academic pathways without adequately exploring or validating vocational alternatives. Through an SDT lens, this reflects a potential failure to support autonomy. Participants may have been guided toward college-based goals that didn't align with their genuine interests or strengths, rather than co-constructing meaningful plans. Additionally, the lack of documented mentorship, workplace experience, or community partnerships in most participants' transition activities suggests insufficient relatedness support. The exceptions; Gerry and Declan, who are employed or actively pursuing trade certifications, may have benefited from more explicit connections to mentors, employers, or trade-specific programs during their transitions. For future ITP design, this data suggests the need for more robust exploration of vocational pathways, intentional elective selection tied to demonstrated interests and strengths, and stronger partnerships with employers and trade organizations to build both competence and relatedness during the transition years.

Although the participants in this study represented some diversity in gender and ethnicity, no clear or consistent patterns emerged in the data that differentiated their experiences of transition planning or self-determination along these lines. The core themes, such as confidence and competence, quiet compliance versus active agency, access to career-linked opportunities, gaps in life-skills instruction, and fragmented connections to external supports, appeared across participants regardless of gender or racial/ethnic background. Given the small sample size and the study's focus on BIF as the primary lens, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence

that gender or ethnicity are irrelevant to transition experiences, but rather that this dataset did not support robust, within-group or between-group analyses on those dimensions.

Taken together, the document analysis begins to answer RQ B by highlighting how specific transition activities (course of study, elective options, goal-setting language, and course selection options) positioned students as they exited high school, but it does not fully capture how prepared they felt for adulthood or how these plans played out over time. The patterns identified here should therefore be read as preliminary indications of opportunity and constraint, to be tested and refined against participants' own accounts. To address this more completely, the next section draws on participants' interview narratives to examine how they experienced these transition activities in practice: whether course choices felt aligned or misaligned with their emerging identities, how supported or constrained they felt as they made postsecondary decisions, and the extent to which they were able to build competence, autonomy, and relatedness in real-world adult contexts. By comparing the documented ITP plans with participants' retrospective accounts of work, education, and daily life after high school in the following sections, I more directly assess the ways specific transition activities did, or did not, prepare them for adulthood.

Interview Analysis and Findings

When analyzing the interview transcripts, several themes emerged in the context of the research questions through an iterative process of qualitative thematic analysis. After each interview, I created personal analytic logs in which I recorded my initial interpretations, noted salient moments related to self-determination, and wrote preliminary answers to the research questions based on that individual participant's story. As I transcribed and edited the interviews, I engaged in close reading, looking for recurring responses, sentiments, and ideas tied to

autonomy, confidence, motivation, and support. I began by generating open codes that captured participants' own language (e.g., "just sitting there," "they listened to me," "I felt confident," "I didn't know what to ask"), and then tallied how often particular ideas and experiences surfaced within each interview and across interviews. This process of constant comparison allowed me to identify patterns that were not only frequent, but also substantively meaningful for understanding how self-determination shaped participants' motivation and ability to navigate life after high school. I examined which codes clustered together, how they related to the constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and where they spoke most directly to the Research Questions.

In this section, I turn to the interview analysis while explicitly building on the document analysis described above. Although the study involved two distinct forms of data collection; document review and semi-structured interviews, the interviews themselves were not independent of the documents. During each conversation, participants and I reviewed their high school transition plans, course histories, and documented goals together, using these records as prompts to reflect on how their school experiences shaped their transitions to adulthood. As a result, the interview findings necessarily overlap with, and extend, the document analysis: they reveal not only what was planned on paper, but how those plans were understood, taken up, or resisted in practice.

I first provide an overview of the themes derived from the interviews as they relate to each research sub-question, to orient the reader to the major patterns in this integrated dataset. I then examine each theme in greater depth by drawing on extended examples from individual participants' narratives, weaving together their recollections of high school, their interpretations of the documented plans, and their descriptions of postschool experiences. Throughout, I use

participants' stories and direct quotations to illustrate how transition planning, school supports, and postschool environments shaped their self-determination and motivation during and after high school. The analysis is organized around the three sub-questions; at the end of each, I synthesize the thematic insights and narrative evidence to offer a more "zoomed-out" response that also speaks back to the overarching research question. This structure is intended to move from a broad synthesis of recurring patterns to a more nuanced, contextualized understanding of how these processes operate in the lives of specific young people.

RQ: A. In what ways did their sense of self-determination (or lack thereof) impact their motivation and ability to navigate life after high school?

To analyze this research question, I focused on how participants talked about feeling confident or uncertain, speaking up or staying quiet, following others' plans or making their own choices, and feeling connected or isolated in relation to school and transition planning. I read their interview transcripts with particular attention to moments where they described motivation, decision-making, and follow-through after high school, and how they linked these experiences to supports they received (or did not receive) through their IEPs and transition plans. Through iterative coding and comparison across cases, I grouped these accounts into patterns that spoke directly to how self-determination, understood in terms of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, shaped their ability to navigate life after high school.

From this cross-case, thematic analysis, four themes emerged that captured the core ways participants described self-determination operating (or failing to operate) in their lives: (1) Confidence and Competence as Foundations of Self-Determination, (2) Self-Advocacy and Communication: Quiet Compliance vs. Active Agency, (3) Autonomy in Action: From Externally Steered Paths to Self-Directed Choices, and (4) Relatedness and Belonging: How

Relationships Sustain (or Erode) Motivation. These themes surfaced repeatedly across all participants, were strongly grounded in the coded data and analytic memos, and together offer a coherent framework for understanding how self-determination and high school transition plans influenced their post–high school navigation.

Table 5

RQ A Themes and Participants

RQ A Themes	Highlighted Stories	Total Participant Involvement with Theme
<u>Confidence and Competence</u> as Foundations of Self-Determination	Yessica, Xander, Gerry	7 of 7 participants described feeling more or less capable (academically, socially, or in adulting tasks) in ways that clearly affected their motivation and follow-through.
<u>Self-Advocacy and Communication</u> : Quiet Compliance vs. Active Agency	Blossom, Bobby	7 of 7 participants gave examples of either speaking up, asking questions, and expressing preferences, or “just sitting there,” going along, and not knowing what to say in meetings or new settings.
<u>Autonomy in Action</u> : From Externally Steered Paths to Self-Directed Choices	Declan, Lee	7 of 7 participants described moments where they followed adults’ plans, and/or instances where they made more self-directed decisions about school, work, or postschool paths.
<u>Relatedness and Belonging</u> : How Relationships Sustain (or Erode) Motivation.	Bobby, Blossom	7 of 7 participants discussed relationships; with teachers, case managers, peers, or family, that either supported their motivation or contributed to feeling isolated or discouraged.

Confidence and Competence as Foundations of Self-Determination

Participants were asked several questions to determine in what ways their sense of self-determination impacted their motivation and ability to navigate life after school. Across participants, how confident and capable they believed themselves to be; academically, socially,

and in “adulting” tasks strongly shaped their motivation and follow-through. All of the participants had examples of situations where their lack of confidence or competence in their skills left them either unable to reach their goal, or unwilling to attempt due to lack of motivation. Five of the seven participants also shared that they had positive experiences where their confidence and competence motivated them to pursue higher career or postsecondary goals.

One participant, Yessica, dropped out of college because of her belief that she was not able to complete a speech. Her lack of confidence in a skill that she wasn’t made to practice during high school, was a direct connection to her inability to finish her chosen education plan.

I feel like I finished [college], I did two years, but I didn't do the speech classes. It was the most terrifying thing ever. I feel like presenting was the most terrifying thing ever. Even in high school. Like, I would stutter so bad. Like, I remember I would turn red and like, you know, it was just bad. – Yessica

Yessica shared that during high school she was often excused from having to give speeches due to her disability and fear. She was able to do private speeches with teachers of her choice, or given alternate assignments. This did not prepare her for her goal, of graduating from a community college, since speech class is a requirement. She completed all the coursework to finish, except her speech class. She recalled how as a teenager she was happy she got out of doing speeches, but as an adult she felt less confident to speak up about things that matter. She shared:

speech helps a lot for just, you know, freedom of speech and sticking up for yourself in the future, not just for classes. Yeah, I'm loud and crazy, but I feel like I don't have that presentation yet, in front of 1000s... when it's like, professional I don't know how to do it... – Yessica

This lack of confidence and skill to do something she thinks is important is directly tied to her motivation to finish her goal. Yessica wants to be a preschool teacher. She wants to go back to

school, transfer to a university and get her teaching licence. Until she can overcome her fear of giving speeches, this won't be an option for her.

Xander demonstrated a moderate sense of self-determination after high school. He proactively enrolled full-time at a local community college College, initially motivated by an interest in healthcare and influenced by family members in the field. However, he described himself as “reserved” and “introverted,” expressing difficulty with confidence, self-advocacy, and job applications, which made navigating new environments and seeking employment challenging. His desire for independence; such as wanting to move out, was evident, but tempered by concerns about financial stability and social support. Xander’s tendency to listen rather than actively participate during school meetings and to hesitate in seeking help also suggests that, while motivated, his ability to access opportunities after high school was impacted by challenges in self-confidence and social interaction. Overall, his sense of self-determination enabled him to pursue postsecondary education but limited the ease with which he could pursue further goals and independence.

Another participant, Gerry showed that when competence was activated in meaningful contexts their motivation and persistence increased. Gerry wasn’t always an active participant in his transition planning, however he was motivated to work as much as possible and this allowed him to enter into a work experience program during high school. He earned high school elective credit while working at a community retail store near the high school. While this job didn’t directly connect to his career interests, his top interest at the time was in working and earning money. Since he was able to access this interest, he was extremely motivated to earn decent grades and be allowed to continue within the work experience program. Allowing him access to a job during high school, also increased his competence and confidence in the workforce. He had

practice advocating and navigating the working experience so when he graduated high school he went on to a local community college for two years, and then onto a trade program in San Diego. He worked full time for two different cities at the same time. He didn't complete his apprenticeship, however he doesn't see this as a bad thing, he attributes his choice to enjoying what he was doing and continuously being motivated by the money he was making. He shared

I went to [a local community college] for two years, and I was working at the city of Escondido at the time, just part time. After, I just went to a trade in San Diego, and they were gonna give me an apprenticeship, but for some reason I didn't really go through with it. And I was like, oh, I'll just stick with the city, because I'm already set in stone there, since I was very comfortable I was just like, oh, I work full time. I make good money right now, so. -Gerry

Gerry felt competent in his skill set, and this encouraged him to seek the best employment situation for him. He moved between the City of Escondido and the City of San Marcos until he earned the job he has. He still has goals of management, and leading a team in the Parks section of city work. This shows strong motivation and sense of self-determination; he has been able to navigate the complex nuances of hiring, moving between high demand jobs, and a willingness to create and maintain new career goals, which include leadership.

Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this theme illustrates how perceived competence functions as a foundational psychological need that powerfully shapes motivation, goal pursuit, and persistence. SDT posits that when individuals experience themselves as capable and effective, they are more likely to internalize goals, engage autonomously, and sustain effort, whereas feelings of incompetence undermine motivation and lead to withdrawal or avoidance (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Participants' narratives reflect this dynamic across academic, social, and "adulting" domains: Yessica's avoidance of required speech courses and eventual withdrawal from college underscore how chronic under-practice of a key skill and repeated accommodations that removed these demands contributed to a fragile

sense of competence, ultimately constraining her capacity to pursue her long-term goal of becoming a preschool teacher. Xander's story similarly shows that moderate self-determination can coexist with limited confidence, where his enrollment in college signals some autonomous striving, but his hesitance to speak up, self-advocate, or seek opportunities restricts the extent to which he can fully act on his aspirations. In contrast, Gerry's experience demonstrates how opportunities to build and exercise competence in personally meaningful contexts; such as paid work aligned with his immediate interest in earning money, can enhance motivation, support more self-directed decision-making, and foster an ongoing willingness to set and revise goals. Taken together, these accounts highlight that schools' and programs' choices about when and how to scaffold versus remove a challenge can directly influence whether students develop the robust sense of competence that SDT identifies as essential for sustained self-determination during and after high school.

Self-Advocacy and Communication: Quiet Compliance vs. Active Agency,

Analysis of the participants' interviews showed that there is a recurring contrast between how participants acted in school/IEP settings and how they functioned in post-school or work settings. In general all participants shared that they had successful relationships with their case managers and most of their teachers. This seemed to create a perceived positive experience for communication and self-advocacy. However, when these students transitioned outside of high school and into real-world experiences, it painted a clearer picture of their true self-advocacy and communication skills and they often seemed insufficient.

Blossom is a good example of this particular theme. Blossom has many speech struggles that impact her adult life. She is a child of immigrant parents who moved here from Vietnam when they were teenagers. They are both deaf. Blossom does not speak Vietnamese sign

language, which inevitably leads to difficulty in their communication ability. During her K-12 experience, she received speech services for articulation as well as pragmatics, and even took American Sign Language during high school to attempt to help support her communication with her parents. Blossom is full of energy, she is often loud, loves talking with friends and isn't shy about sharing how she feels. In high school, her teachers would have shared that, among others, she advocates well when she needs help, she works in groups collaboratively, and follows class rules. However, her communication organization is often difficult to follow and understand. She mentions receiving speech help as an adult after high school to try and help her with communication. She has lost several jobs due to her inability to effectively communicate. She is frustrated with lack of real-world support in her abilities to communicate effectively.

I remember I did, went to a local hospital to go to speech therapy, and... I have noticed I have hard time explaining myself. Like, if someone asked me, what is an umbrella? I was like, I don't know. It just umbrella. I think I got fired because of my speech. Yeah, because, like, yeah, because I'm having trouble. Socialized with people, especially clients, so I'm struggling with that. -Blossom

Blossom finished her Cosmetology certificate from a local school in 3 months. She is one of only three participants who has completed a certificated training program at this time. She worked at Sprouts while she was trying to find a nail tech job at a salon. She was hired in October of 2024, and let go in January 2025. Her manager told her she was getting too many client complaints about how she communicated. Blossom is now working at a local major retail department store and says it feels much less stressful, but she still wants to work in cosmetology. She isn't sure she will find a salon that can help her with on the job training. She would like to move out and live on her own, however she isn't confident in her abilities to financially provide for herself, or in her abilities to effectively communicate with the world around her. Blossom currently has a case worker through Regional Center, and they are helping her navigate support systems and get

her signed up for more support. She shared that she has added herself to a waitlist for group home living.

In Booby's case, self-advocacy and communication look markedly different in school/IEP contexts compared to real-world settings. In high school, he characterizes himself as "shy" and "quiet" in his IEP meetings, recalling that it was "definitely... nerve-wracking with all you guys there and my dad being there". Rather than directly voicing his own preferences when he wanted to quit football, he remembers relying on his father to take the lead in that difficult conversation with his coach: "I remember, it was an IEP meeting too... we're talking to Coach about it... it was a tough conversation, I wanted my dad to tell him that I didn't want to do it anymore". These accounts illustrate what I refer to as quiet compliance: Bobby was present in meetings and could speak if prompted, but largely deferred to adults, especially when stakes or emotions felt high.

At the same time, Bobby frames those same IEP experiences as important rehearsal for later self-advocacy, describing a shift toward more confident, self-directed communication in adulthood. Reflecting on job applications and interviews, he explains that the structure and formality of IEP meetings made later adult interactions feel more familiar: "definitely, like, say you're, like, applying to [a] job, going for any interviews. It's like, I've been through this before in the IEP... it was more natural and I was less anxious at those". He also links changes in his mindset to reflecting on earlier experiences of not speaking up or not fully investing himself in activities like football:

When you're, like, not playing in the field a lot, sometimes that can definitely, like, change your mindset about it. Some coaches there that I didn't really like as well, that made me feel like I don't know, [I'm] just not important to the team. So kind of definitely unmotivating. I can even say [about] myself too, I think I was a little bit more lazy. I think I was definitely nervous. I could have tried definitely harder. So I could... look back on myself, because I have a different mindset now,

which I like, just, you know, just putting in more work to wherever you want to be... just kind of, like, all around. – Bobby

Now working as an assistant manager at a local car service station, Bobby routinely engages in front-facing workplace communication, takes responsibility for customers and coworkers, and navigates interactions that would have felt intimidating in school. His reflections on having a “different mindset now” and focusing on “putting in more work to wherever you want to be... all around”, signal a developmental move from system-shaped, adult-mediated participation toward more active, self-initiated agency in real-world contexts. In other words, the same young person who once relied on his father to deliver difficult messages in an IEP meeting now describes himself as someone who can walk into a job interview thinking, “I’ve been through this before,” and act on his own behalf.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate how the theme of “Self-Advocacy and Communication: Quiet Compliance vs. Active Agency” aligns closely with Self-Determination Theory’s emphasis on autonomy and relatedness as core psychological needs. In school settings, 6 out of the 7 participants would have appeared to be “good communicators” because they were compliant, polite, and able to follow familiar routines with supportive adults who knew them well; however, their postschool experiences reveal that this did not always translate into the kind of autonomous, context-flexible self-advocacy required in less scaffolded environments. For Blossom, longstanding communication challenges that only partially addressed in school and largely disconnected from the complex linguistic and cultural context of her home life, have undermined her sense of effectiveness in the workplace and constrained her capacity to act on her goals in cosmetology and independent living, reflecting a an undermining of both competence and autonomy needs. By contrast, Bobby’s trajectory suggests that even experiences of “quiet compliance” in IEP meetings can, under certain conditions, evolve into more active

agency when young people internalize these interactions as practice for adult roles and relationships. His later comfort in job interviews and supervisory responsibilities indicates a growing sense of autonomy and relatedness in real-world contexts.

Across these cases, the contrast between how participants were perceived in school and how they functioned after graduation underscores that fostering true self-advocacy requires not only supportive relationships and structured opportunities to speak, but also intentional development of the skills, confidence, and role expectations that allow young people to move from compliant participation toward genuinely self-directed communication in adulthood.

Autonomy in Action: From Externally Steered Paths to Self-Directed Choices

Participants' sense of self-determination is closely tied to how much they could truly choose, versus being steered or constrained by others or circumstances. In this section, I trace how their post-school trajectories reveal a gradual shift from externally imposed expectations; by schools, service systems, and families, toward more self-directed decision-making. By examining these inflection points, I illustrate how autonomy is not a fixed trait but an emergent process learned and developed over time, often in tension with institutional structures and limited options.

Declan's account illustrates a dynamic tension between strong external supports and his gradually emerging internal motivation. In high school, he describes feeling comfortable and supported in IEP meetings where adults "remind[ed] me what I need to work on... my flaws and stuff" and he notes that co-taught classes "gave me like a challenge... and then my other teachers [special education teachers]... would help me". These structures clearly scaffolded his competence and kept him engaged, even during periods when "life's kick[ing] my butt" and he quietly considered dropping out for family reasons rather than academic difficulty. At the same

time, he explicitly states that this early participation in meetings “wasn’t really connected to my brain” when it came to decisions like registering with disability services at the local community college, suggesting that much of the planning remained externally driven and only partially internalized.

After high school, Declan begins to exercise more autonomous choice, especially as he experiments with different trades and ultimately decides, “that’s when I found out I like electrician, and that’s when I wanted to take the trade school and pursue my career on that”. His move away from an online career program he “didn’t like” toward a trade school he “thought was better for me,” even taking on a loan he feels he can manage, shows him actively reclaiming direction over his path. Likewise, his plan to work both for a company and for his father’s contracting business as a “side job”, reflects a self-authored balance between external opportunities and personal preference. Together, these experiences highlight the theme that while external supports in school helped stabilize and guide him, his strongest motivation and persistence emerged when he could align those supports with his own emerging sense of choice, interest, and responsibility, which came after high school.

Participants’ narratives highlighted a continual negotiation between external supports and their own internal drive, with autonomy emerging in the spaces where those two forces aligned. For Lee, being included in his IEP meetings contributed to a felt sense of participation rather than passivity. When asked whether he remembered being part of his IEP meetings, he affirms, “I believe I attended all of them”. When asked if he felt he was part of the meetings he responds, “Yes, yes”. This sense of being “part of” the process was strongly mediated by relationships: Lee explains that his close connection with his case managers made it easier to communicate his needs, “me and them were always close, so that was easy to just relay that information as well”.

In these moments, external structures (IEP meetings, designated case managers) did not replace his agency; instead, they created conditions under which speaking up felt both safe and meaningful.

At the same time, Lee's account shows how autonomy was constrained by circumstances beyond his control, even when motivation was present. Reflecting on his transition plan, he notes, "I tried to do the plan, but a lot of things got in the way of me doing the plan... correctly", later describing these barriers as "life... after high school". Yet within those constraints, the planning process still fostered internalized self-knowledge: it "let me, I guess know what I would need in future jobs and stuff as well. Like, Hey, I've had these needs before. They've helped me in the past [high school]. Yeah, they might be able to help me here [college]". Similarly, structured experiences such as campus visits "It helped me clarify where I wanted to go... because for me, [lists both local community colleges]. They're up in the air at the time" and small separate-setting classes that "felt safer because there were... less people" but also shared, the general education classes "also... felt harder but I was proud" illustrate how supports can both scaffold and complicate autonomy. Across these examples, Lee's self-determination appears as a balance: he is actively trying, choosing, and reflecting, but always in relation to systems, people, and life events that shape how fully his choices can be enacted. Lee dropped out of the local community college after one semester. He attributed this to health problems and lack of direction in his career choices.

Taken together, these accounts of Declan and Lee demonstrate how the theme "Autonomy in Action: From Externally Steered Paths to Self-Directed Choices" speaks directly to the research question and to Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on autonomy as a basic psychological need. SDT suggests that young people are most motivated and persistent when

they experience themselves as authors of their own actions, rather than merely complying with external demands (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2008). In both cases, school-based supports; co-taught classes, IEP meetings, case management, campus visits, were crucial in scaffolding competence and offering relational safety. Yet participants' strongest sense of self-determination emerged when these structures were aligned with their own emerging preferences, goals, and definitions of a "good" path. Declan's shift from externally organized planning to actively choosing a trade program that "felt better" for him, and Lee's use of IEP participation and college visits to clarify what he needed and where he wanted to go, illustrate how autonomy develops not in isolation from systems but through ongoing negotiation with them. At the same time, their experiences also reveal the limits of autonomy when structural, health, or life circumstances constrain what choices are realistically available. This highlights that students' self-determination and motivation during and after high school depend not only on individual will, but on whether educational contexts intentionally foster opportunities for meaningful, self-endorsed choice and follow-through.

Relatedness and Belonging: How Relationships Sustain (or Erode) Motivation.

Feeling connected, seen, and "having a place" shows up repeatedly as a condition that shapes how self-determination actually plays out for these participants. Bobby's narrative shows how a sense of belonging, or the loss of it, directly shaped his motivation. He describes football as the main place he initially felt connected: "football was fun I'd say that was definitely like... took your mind off a lot of things". However, over time, feeling less valued and less successful undermined that connection and his desire to participate: "I did kind of fall off on it after a couple years... kind of lost motivation". He explains that, "when you're like, not playing in the field a lot... that can definitely like change your mindset about it," and that some coaches "made

me feel like... not important to the team". By senior year, he characterizes it as "definitely like a loner year," saying he distanced himself from others and no longer felt part of a group, noting, "I was a little bit more distant... I kind of didn't really associate myself with the same group of people". These experiences of diminished belonging coincided with declining motivation and disengagement from school-based activities.

In contrast, Bobby's motivation and sense of competence were furthered in contexts where he felt successful, supported, and "had a place." He repeatedly highlights smaller IEP classes as spaces where he could focus and do well, explaining that "it's a lot easier to pay attention in the smaller classes" and that, there, he sometimes "felt like the smartest," especially in math. He recalls Academic Success as a positive environment where "you get a lot of work done", and credits electives like woodworking and personal finance with making him feel engaged and capable. He shared that woodworking "was funny, definitely one of my favorites... I actually felt like I was working on something" and it "used to wake me up first period". Beyond school, family expectations and support created another relational anchor that kept him committed: his dad "leaned hard" on him about grades and later about working, telling him "if you're not gonna go to school, you definitely gotta work". Bobby now frames this as motivating, saying he is "thankful for my dad... to have and that he lets me stay here still" while taking on bills and responsibilities at home. Across these accounts, feeling seen, supported, and successful in small classes, high interest electives, and family relationships, helped sustain his motivation and enactment of self-determination throughout his transition to adulthood.

This theme, "Relatedness and Belonging: How Relationships Sustain (or Erode) Motivation," speaks directly to Research Question A and to Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on relatedness as a basic psychological need. Self-determination is not purely

individual; it is heavily shaped by relational contexts. Supportive relationships and a sense of belonging appear to amplify internal motivation and capacity, while isolation or misattunement often diminishes both. Bobby's experiences show that when he felt overlooked or "not important" on the football team, his motivation and engagement dropped, whereas small IEP classes, hands-on electives, and firm but caring expectations at home helped him feel seen, competent, and anchored. In this way, his narrative suggests that the degree to which students can enact self-determination during and after high school depends not only on their personal skills, but also on whether their school and family environments provide consistent, attuned relationships that foster a genuine sense of connection and place.

Blossom's narrative offers another clear example of how tenuous relatedness and belonging can be, and how directly this shapes motivation for students with BIF. When asked whether there was a place or group at school that felt like it was "hers," she replied, "I would say, not really," explaining that she carried "so much emotion that people don't understand" and that "most of the trauma is blocked". Even so, she described school as a relative "safe place" compared to home, especially before COVID. Reflecting on the shift to remote learning, she shared, "I'm in bed. And the reason why I'm in bed because I'm depressed. I'm depressed all the time," contrasting that with in-person schooling where she could "get up, get ready and just go". From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, these comments show that her need for relatedness was only partially met: school routines offered some safety, but she lacked a stable sense of belonging with peers or adults, which in turn weakened her ongoing motivation and engagement (RQ A).

Blossom also described struggling to feel understood and supported in key relationships and settings, which further constrained her self-determination. She recalled having a "hard time

explaining myself” in speech therapy and at home, where her parents used a mix of ASL and Vietnamese Sign Language; in those moments, she often thought internally, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m so sorry”. She noted wanting “more sex education” and more reliable guidance about her body and relationships, indicating that she did not feel she had access to trusted adults who could answer questions or help her navigate these aspects of growing up. Taken together, these experiences highlight how gaps in emotional support, clear communication, and trustworthy information undermined her sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. For RQ A, Blossom’s story illustrates that when students do not feel they truly belong or have people who understand them, their motivation and ability to navigate both school and the transition to adulthood are significantly constrained, even when some formal supports are in place.

Connection to Research Question

Across all four themes, participants who experienced the most positive transitions were not those who received the most services, but those who had at least one area, whether in a specific class, relationship, or moment of choice, where they felt genuinely competent and heard. This competence and voice then traveled into other domains of their lives, shaping their confidence in navigating postsecondary challenges. The data suggests that self-determination for students with BIF is less about the comprehensiveness of transition planning and more about whether the planning process itself honors their agency and builds on their strengths.

RQ B. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood?

To analyze this research question, I examined how participants talked about their courses, electives, work experiences, and IEP/ITP activities alongside what was documented in their

transcripts and transition plans, looking for recurring patterns in how these activities supported (or failed to support) their readiness for postschool life. Through iterative coding and comparison across cases, I identified clusters of experiences that spoke directly to preparation for employment, postsecondary education, and independent living.

From this analysis, I distilled four themes that captured the core ways participants described the role of specific transition activities in preparing them for adulthood: (1) Hands-on, career-linked electives and work experiences were the strongest preparation, (2) interest-based electives built confidence and belonging but were often only weakly connected to careers, (3) formal transition planning and goal-setting helped when personalized but were frequently underutilized or misaligned, and (4) there were significant gaps in life-skills and practical “adulting” instruction. These themes emerged because they surfaced consistently across all participants, were strongly grounded in both the coded interview data and document analysis, and offered a coherent framework for explaining how concrete transition activities did, or did not, translate into meaningful preparation for adult roles and responsibilities.

Table 6*RQ B Themes and Participants*

RQ B Themes	Highlighted Stories	Total Participant Involvement with Theme
<u>Hands-On, Career-Linked Electives</u> and Work Experiences Were the Strongest Preparation	Gerry, Bobby, Declan	7 of 7 participants described at least one hands-on, career-linked, or work-based experience (e.g., CTE, trades, job training, on-the-job learning) and reflected on how it did or did not prepare them for adult work.
<u>Interest-Based Electives Built Confidence and Belonging</u> , but Often Weakly Linked to Careers	Yessica, Xander, Lee	7 of 7 participants talked about interest-driven electives (art, ceramics, PE, music, etc.) as important to feeling confident, engaged, or “like themselves,” while also noting little or no direct career linkage.
<u>Formal Transition Planning</u> and Goal-Setting Helped When Personalized, but Were Often <u>Underutilized or Misaligned</u>	Xander, Blossom, Declan	7 of 7 participants discussed IEP/ITP meetings, written goals, or transition conversations, and described them as helpful when personalized but often limited, late, or not fully aligned with their real interests or paths.
Significant <u>Gaps in Life-Skills and Practical “Adulting” Instruction</u> .	Xander, Gerry, Lee, Blossom	7 of 7 participants mentioned missing or insufficient instruction in at least one practical adult domain (money, forms, transportation, housing, benefits, health, or daily living), indicating a shared perception of life-skills gaps.

Hands-On, Career-Linked Electives and Work Experiences Were the Strongest Preparation

Across participants, the most directly useful preparation for adulthood came from hands-on classes and real work experience, especially when these were clearly connected to actual jobs or trades. None of the participants mentioned any core content classes from their course of study when discussing things that prepared them for adulthood.

Gerry's story illustrates how hands-on, career-linked electives and real work experience were his most powerful preparation for adulthood. He consistently identified woodshop as the class where he felt the most competent and engaged, describing it as the one class where he "felt the smartest" and later adding that he stayed with the same group and "had fun in there," and even joined the tiny house building program, which mirrored real-world construction work. This hands-on confidence carried into his postsecondary path, where he earned a carpentry certificate at the local community college and briefly entered a carpentry trade program, showing a direct line from school-based practice to adult vocational exploration. At the same time, his work experience during high school, "I remember, I got college credits for having a job... I worked at Smart Final when I used to go here", and later part-time city work during college, "I went to the local community college for two years, and I was working at the city of Escondido at the time, just part time", helped normalize employment, build a work identity, and eventually lead him into stable full-time city employment. Together, these experiences show that for Gerry, it was doing real work and building real things, not abstract planning, that most directly built the skills, confidence, and pathways he uses in adulthood.

Bobby's story illustrates how hands-on, career-linked experiences offered the most meaningful preparation for adulthood. He repeatedly returns to woodworking as one of his favorite and most impactful classes, emphasizing both its practical and safety demands: he describes it as "funny, definitely one of my favorites, because it was just, like, hands on. I actually felt like I was working on something sometimes", and notes that it "taught me, you know, pay attention even more, because there's a lot of safety that is involved in that class". Woodworking "was a good first class" that "used to wake me up", suggesting it not only built technical and safety skills but also engaged him in a way traditional academics did not.

Similarly, he highlights personal finance as a course that connected directly to adult responsibilities, saying he liked it because, “I feel like I got to learn things outside of learning, like history... it taught you about being responsible with money and being on time on things”.

These school experiences flowed directly into his real-world work at Valvoline, where on-the-job training solidified his preparation for adult roles. Bobby explains that at Valvoline “you can have zero experience... it’s all hands-on training there”, and he now works as an assistant manager, taking on responsibilities that mirror the responsibility, safety, and time management emphasized in woodworking and finance courses he took in high school. He connects school structures to adult expectations, noting that “time management is... like even the worker got to be places on time, because you know in school, you had to be in class... everything was on time there, and showing up as well”. Taken together, Bobby’s reflections show that the most directly useful preparation for adulthood came from hands-on, practically oriented classes and real work experience that clearly mapped onto actual jobs and the everyday expectations of adult life.

Declan’s story underscores how hands-on, career-linked experiences were far more powerful preparation for adulthood than any abstract planning. He repeatedly ties his growth to applied electives and real work, explaining that woodworking “helped me with the construction, actually, because we do a lot of, like, table saw, different type of... saws” and that weight training fit his existing interest in “exercising and just being healthy.” These classes gave him concrete skills and familiarity with tools and physical work, which later translated smoothly into construction jobs and, ultimately, his choice to pursue electrician training. In contrast, formal transition planning pointed him toward community college without a clear major, leaving him

“just doing the classes” and eventually disengaging. The preparation that stuck was not the abstract postsecondary talk, but the tangible experiences that resembled real jobs.

From a self-determination theory (SDT) lens, these hands-on experiences strengthened all three basic needs. They enhanced competence by allowing Declan to see himself succeed with tools, machinery, and job-like tasks; this made construction and electrician work feel doable and meaningful. They supported autonomy because he could actively discover what he liked, “doing different trades to like, see what I like”, and then choose a path (electrician) that matched his own interests rather than simply following a generic college track. Finally, working with his dad’s company and envisioning future work there also nurtured relatedness, grounding his career in trusted relationships. Together, these elements show that when electives and work experiences are clearly tied to real trades, they don’t just transfer skills, they create the conditions for genuinely self-determined postschool decisions.

Transition activities that are applied, hands-on, and explicitly linked to real jobs or trades (woodshop, tiny house, work experience, Valvoline, work with dad) were the most clearly transferable to adulthood. These experiences also aligned strongly with Self-Determination Theory: they supported students’ autonomy (making real choices in authentic tasks), competence (building visible skills and seeing progress), and relatedness (working alongside peers, mentors, or family members). In contrast, simply “meeting course requirements” without clear application felt much less impactful, offering fewer opportunities for students to feel genuinely self-directed, capable, or connected.

Interest-Based Electives Built Confidence and Belonging, but Often Weakly Linked to Careers

Electives and course choices often nurtured self-confidence, engagement, and a sense of belonging, even when they did not clearly translate into a long-term career path. In this section, I

examine how interest-driven classes created spaces where participants felt competent, seen, and socially connected in ways that core academic or mandated transition activities often did not. These experiences sometimes functioned as sanctuaries from stigma or low expectations, allowing students to experiment with identities beyond those imposed by disability labels or remedial tracks. At the same time, the weak linkage between these electives and concrete post-school opportunities reveals a missed chance to more intentionally bridge students' genuine interests with viable vocational pathways.

Yessica's story illustrates how certain courses powerfully created confidence and belonging without clearly anchoring her to a long-term career path. She describes her College Prep Government class as the one that made her, "feel what a regular class felt like," noting that with two teachers (cotaught) and a supportive general ed environment, she, "felt like I was a part of something, compared to just being a part of, like, the chumps... where it was, I need more help". She reflects that this class, "really helped me, like, prepare" for expectations beyond high school, suggesting increased competence and inclusion; two core needs in self-determination theory (SDT). At the same time, she does not link CP Government to a specific future career, but rather to feeling more capable and worthy of being in "regular" academic spaces.

Electives played a similar role in building her confidence and sense of school belonging. Yessica repeatedly names ceramics as the place she "really loved," where she "felt... really a part of the school" and connected with peers she "would never have thought I would talk to," but did, and "became friends with in ceramics". She explains that ceramics helped her "lift off," gaining confidence that carried into "day to day stuff after high school". Although she briefly considered majoring in ceramics, she ultimately concluded it was "not realistic... more like a side hustle kind of job" and later identifies preschool teaching/child development as her real

career goal. Thus, her electives and CP Government clearly fostered autonomy-supportive spaces and a sense of competence and relatedness (in SDT terms), but they did so in ways that were only loosely connected, if at all, to her eventual decision to pursue early childhood education. As discussed more fully in the barriers section (RQ C), Yessica underscores that she did not have access to child-development or other career-aligned electives that would have allowed her to translate this emerging goal into a more coherent and supported pathway.

Xander's description of his classes and electives illustrates how school experiences nurtured his confidence and sense of belonging, even when they did not clearly connect to a long-term career. He explains that in the smaller, separate, academic settings he "felt more comfortable in like, you know, in smaller groups" and that in English he "really felt little bit more confidence... especially in smaller groups, because we had a lot of help". Electives such as PE, art, and floral design also contributed to this sense of competence and relatedness: "there was a couple [classes] I was pretty interested in, like... PE... art classes... [and] floral design," noting that his mom "always loved me bringing home flowers". From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) standpoint, these experiences supported his competence (feeling capable in English and electives) and relatedness (positive relationships with teachers and family), which in turn helped sustain his motivation to continue on to the local community college.

At the same time, Xander highlights that this confidence and belonging were only loosely tied to his emerging career goals in healthcare. When asked about health-related classes in high school, he responds, "No, yeah. I don't believe there were any", and later reflects that he "probably... should have" taken healthcare classes "if they were here". He was already interested in medical fields, "it was interesting to me... plus my other siblings also took, like, health care classes as well" and both his brother and sister are "nurses", yet his own elective pathway did not

include a clear healthcare or vocational course. In SDT terms, the school environment strengthened his general sense of competence and belonging, but provided fewer opportunities to build career-specific competence and autonomy aligned with his radiology aspirations. This left a gap between feeling supported as a learner and feeling systematically prepared for a concrete adult career path.

Lee's experience with electives like graphic design and pottery illustrates how course choice can build confidence and belonging, even when it doesn't clearly map onto a long-term career path. He describes graphic design as "one of my favorite classes" and calls pottery "another great one", noting that he now even has "a pottery wheel at my house". These examples show how trying "stuff that I just didn't get the opportunity to usually" as he put it, nurtured his self-awareness and sustained interests beyond high school, deepening his sense of competence and enjoyment in these domains. From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective, these electives supported his autonomy (choosing classes aligned with his interests) and competence (experiencing success and mastery), which likely contributed to his overall engagement and confidence in school.

At the same time, these positive experiences did not crystallize into a clearly defined career plan. Lee notes that "the computer stuff just came easy" and that he has long been "a very big nerd", suggesting a strong sense of competence and intrinsic interest in both technology and creative work. Yet, when reflecting on transition, he focuses more on missing "life skills" courses, such as "financial things like taxes and stuff like that" and even "maybe offer a cooking class", rather than naming a specific career outcome that emerged from those electives. In SDT terms, his electives clearly supported competence and elements of relatedness (feeling

comfortable and engaged in those spaces), but the link from that nurtured confidence to concrete vocational pathways remained relatively weak or indirect.

Across these narratives, the theme “Interest-Based Electives Built Confidence and Belonging, but Often Weakly Linked to Careers” highlights how Self-Determination Theory’s needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were supported in ways that directly address Research Question A. These stories show that interest-based electives often nurtured internal readiness, confidence, belonging, identity, and creativity, by giving students spaces where they could choose what they liked, feel capable, and connect with peers and teachers. Sometimes these experiences had unexpected transfer (for example, skills and confidence from woodworking contributing to later comfort with automotive or hands-on work), but they rarely formed a coherent, intentional career pipeline. Instead, they contributed more to a sense of “who I am” and “where I feel I belong” than to a clearly mapped job path. In SDT terms, schools were often successful in meeting students’ psychological needs within elective contexts, yet they did not consistently leverage that motivation and competence toward structured, career-aligned opportunities for life after high school.

Formal Transition Planning and Goal-Setting Helped When Personalized, but Were Often Underutilized or Misaligned

Some students benefited from IEP participation, Workability, and goal-setting conversations, while others experienced these supports as surface-level, underused, or not truly internalized. In this section, I explore how formal transition planning processes could either scaffold a clearer sense of direction or remain disconnected from students’ actual interests, capacities, and emerging adult identities. I highlight the conditions under which structured tools; such as written goals, checklists, and meetings with transition staff, were adapted to individual

needs and taken up by students themselves, versus when they operated more as compliance artifacts to satisfy institutional requirements. By contrasting these patterns, I show how personalization and meaningful student involvement were critical to transforming formal plans into lived pathways, rather than paperwork that failed to shape real choices.

Xander's experience with formal transition planning reflects how IEP structures can inform students without fully empowering them to shape their own paths. He reports that he attended his IEP meetings, "Yes, I believe all of them", but describes his role as largely passive: "I think I'm just like, just kind of there listening... like, all the feedback, you know, everything else". This suggests that while he gained awareness of the process and available supports, he had limited opportunities to practice self-advocacy or exercise autonomy in decision-making (key components in Self-Determination Theory). The formal plan did capture some of his genuine interests, his transition pages indicated he wanted to go to the local community college and pursue healthcare. In SDT terms, the planning process partially supported autonomy alignment (the goals reflected his stated interests), but did not fully cultivate his sense of ownership or voice in the meetings themselves as he shared he never spoke up or asked questions during transition planning.

Two years after graduation, however, Xander's situation shows how this surface-level alignment did not fully translate into effective navigation of adulthood. He is at the local community college "full time" in "just general ed studies," "still trying to find a job," and still living with his parents, noting he wants to move out but that "it's hard... especially it is so expensive nowadays". He also acknowledges significant barriers in confidence and self-advocacy: "I was facing a little bit of confident, confidence issues... I am a bit introverted so it's kind of hard for me to truly, like, put myself out there". Reflecting back, he wishes there had

been “more... like, check checkups” and “more time” with a case manager, suggesting that the planning felt episodic rather than ongoing and internalized. From an SDT perspective, Xander’s story illustrates a transition system that partially supported competence (by setting a realistic academic path) and relatedness (positive relationships with teachers), but underutilized the IEP and transition planning process as a vehicle for building sustained autonomy, self-advocacy skills, and practical next-step readiness, leaving him in a prolonged, somewhat stalled transition between school and stable adult roles.

Blossom's story fits Theme 3 in that personalized transition planning clearly helped when it aligned with her interests, yet key pieces were underutilized or left disconnected from her broader life. She recalls repeatedly voicing her vocational goal: “I remember I keep repeating, like, I want to be in cosmetology school, which is like, I want to do nails all the time”, and she emphasizes that these were truly her own choices, explaining that she picked her goals herself rather than having them chosen for her. In SDT terms, her autonomy was honored: her IEP transition plan was built around attending the local community college Institute of Cosmetology, and she notes that this plan aligned with what she actually did, adding that she is “passing my test too”. She confirms using Workability and describes how Miss Clark helped her, “set up more support” and make arrangements with the local community college. Beyond high school, she describes support from Disability Services at the local community college, saying she did get “help on the test”, and mentions having “someone outside the school” as a tutor who helped her “with my math and reading”. These experiences show her feeling more competent within a structured, supported path that was tailored to a personally meaningful goal.

At the same time, Blossom highlights how formal planning and services were often too narrow or underutilized to fully support her transition into adult life, suggesting misalignment

once she moved beyond school. She points out that there were “no specific ones about cosmetology specifically, or nails or makeup specifically” among the electives, so she relied on classes like Art, Chemistry and ceramics, which she tried to connect conceptually to acrylic nails and chemical processes. Looking back, she identifies major unmet needs that extend beyond a narrow academic/vocational focus: she says she needed “more job program” and more support with interviews because “I feel like I need more support there... what if they ask you question?... I guess that's a hard part”. From an SDT lens, her account shows that while one piece of the system supported autonomy and pockets of competence around a specific career goal, the broader transition planning did not meet all of her needs, as she is not currently working in her chosen field or using her education.

Declan’s story illustrates how formal transition planning and goal-setting were helpful for school success, but only partially translated into meaningful postschool direction. He describes his IEPs and support classes as spaces where adults actively helped him manage school: “I remember like... them asking... me a bunch of questions and me answering them... I did. I felt comfortable to talk. And they also helped me with, like, how to manage my grades too”. He also identifies his academic success/study skills class as a place of belonging that, “helped me, like, with all my homework and, like, my school work [on] track”, and he appreciated co-taught classes that “gave me like a challenge” while teachers “would help me... learn about whatever we were learning”. From an SDT perspective, these supports clearly bolstered his competence (he could do the work) and relatedness (he felt comfortable and part of a community). However, when asked whether participation in IEP meetings carried over into later adult decisions, such as navigating loans or disability services, he reflects, “it wasn’t really connected to my brain”, suggesting that the formal planning process was only partially internalized.

In contrast, his actual career direction emerged after high school, largely outside formal transition structures, through trial-and-error and real work. Declan explains that after trying community college without a clear major, he was “just doing the classes” and eventually left because he “didn’t like it” and “didn’t know what to major in”. It was while working “full time construction” and “doing, like, different trades to like, see what I like” that he “found out I like electrician,” leading him to decide “I wanted to take the trade school and pursue my career on that”. This pathway into electrician work, which was rooted in hands-on experience and work with his dad’s contracting company, did not come from IEP goal-setting or structured school-based career exploration, which he notes did not include information about trades: “I didn’t... hear nothing about electrician... I didn’t know anything about like trades at all”. Viewed through SDT, his strongest autonomous motivation emerges when he can act on his own interests in real settings, choosing trade school as “better for me”, rather than following a generic college plan. Thus, Declan’s case shows how formal transition planning supported day-to-day academic functioning and self-knowledge, but was underutilized and misaligned with his eventual, self-determined trade pathway.

Across these cases, the theme, “Formal Transition Planning and Goal-Setting Helped When Personalized, but Were Often Underutilized or Misaligned” speaks directly to Research Question A and to Self-Determination Theory’s emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When transition plans genuinely reflected students’ interests, as with Xander’s stated goal of a local community college and healthcare, or Blossom’s cosmetology plan; they provided a basic scaffold for autonomy and some sense of competence and support. However, the narratives also show that these structures often remained episodic, adult-directed, or too narrowly focused, giving students limited practice in real self-advocacy, problem-solving, or navigating

broader adult roles. Xander's stalled progress at the local community college, Blossom's struggle to translate her certificate into stable cosmetology work, and Declan's eventual discovery of electrical trades outside the IEP process all suggest that formal planning documents and meetings frequently stopped short of cultivating deeply internalized, self-endorsed pathways. From an SDT perspective, the system tended to inform and accommodate students rather than consistently using transition planning as a sustained, relational process to build robust autonomy, career-specific competence, and a felt sense of ownership over their futures.

Significant Gaps in Life-Skills and Practical “Adulthood” Instruction.

All seven participants explicitly or implicitly pointed to missing instruction in life skills and practical adult tasks, even when they felt academically or socially prepared. In this study, I use the term “adulthood” to refer to the everyday responsibilities and practical competencies required to function with increasing independence in adult life. This includes managing money and bills, completing forms and applications, arranging and using transportation, understanding and accessing benefits and services, organizing time and schedules, accessing health care, and handling basic housing and household responsibilities. Across the seven interviews, students did not use the term “adulthood” themselves, but they repeatedly referenced these core domains more than two dozen times collectively. This consistent pattern across all seven participants provided a strong empirical basis for treating “life-skills and adulthood” as a central analytic theme in the findings. In this context, “adulthood” captures not only whether students were exposed to these topics, but also whether they felt prepared, confident, and supported in performing them without relying entirely on family members.

In this section, I examine how gaps in areas such as money management, transportation, housing, time management, and navigating bureaucracy left young people feeling unready for

everyday responsibilities. Participants' narratives highlight a disconnect between the skills prioritized in school and the competencies they later realized were essential for sustaining work, managing benefits, and living more independently. By centering these overlooked domains of adulting, I show how insufficient practical preparation constrained their autonomy and increased their reliance on family or service systems after high school.

Xander's interview highlights clear gaps in life-skills and practical "adulting" instruction, even though he felt reasonably supported academically. When asked what adult topics he wishes he had learned, he immediately emphasizes "especially money" and acknowledges that job-related skills are an area of struggle, explaining that he faces "a little bit of... confidence issues" and that, as he's "a bit introverted," it is "kind of hard for me to truly, like, put myself out there" when applying or interviewing for jobs. He also wishes there had been classes explicitly tied to healthcare pathways, suggesting schools should offer "classes... like, you know, like, health, you know, prepare them for like... community, like, like, let's say nursing, for example". From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, these comments suggest that while his schooling fostered some academic competence, it did not sufficiently build practical, real-world competence and autonomy in financial literacy, job seeking, and domain-specific preparation, leaving him feeling less ready to manage adult responsibilities and to move forward confidently into work and independent living.

Xander also describes ongoing struggles with key aspects of adult life; friendships, independence, and choosing a career pathway that feels manageable given his social and communication challenges. Although he wants to move out, he is still living with his parents and admits that, while he'd like independence, he needs "a stable job at least... it's hard, yeah, especially it is so expensive nowadays". Socially, he identifies being "a bit introverted," sharing

that it is “kind of hard for me to truly, like, put myself out there” when trying to apply or interview for jobs, and agrees that he could have benefited from “some social support... helping with, like friends and social conversations and... getting started and going from just like a quick conversation to like a friendship”. These same confidence and communication concerns appear to shape his career decisions: while he “originally wanted to... become a nurse,” he ultimately moved away from that path because “there’s a lot of community service you have to do”, suggesting that the relational and communicative demands of nursing felt overwhelming. From an SDT perspective, Xander’s narrative points to gaps in his sense of competence and autonomy around social communication and independent living, which continue to constrain his ability to form adult relationships, live on his own, and pursue his preferred healthcare roles with confidence.

Gerry’s account strongly exemplifies the theme of significant gaps in life-skills and practical “adulthood” instruction, particularly around finances and paperwork, and shows how this undermines his SDT needs for competence and autonomy. When reflecting on what classes would have helped most, he immediately points to finance, explaining that when he applied at the city “you gotta fill out the taxes forms and all that. And when I was doing that, I was like, I don’t, I don’t know what it is... I don’t know what numbers put where” and adding that “even now, when I was applying for health insurance, I [was] like, I don’t know... Forms... most of it was like, ‘Oh, how much do you make a year?’ and I was like, I don’t know!”. Later, he broadens this to “all money habits... I still struggle with that”. Academically, he was able to progress and graduate, and vocationally he built strong hands-on competence, but these quotes show that core adult tasks, forms, taxes, health insurance, money management, these were never explicitly taught, leaving him feeling unsure and dependent when navigating essential systems. In SDT

terms, school-based transition supports bolstered his competence in work-related domains but failed to nurture his felt competence and autonomous functioning in everyday financial and bureaucratic life, creating ongoing barriers in adulthood.

Lee's narrative highlights substantial gaps in life-skills and "adulting" instruction, even though school supported his interests and some aspects of self-awareness. When asked what would have helped, he immediately points to "financial things like taxes and stuff like that" and even imagines "maybe a tax person could come in", stressing that he "don't want to get fined for that". He broadens this to "life skills and money in general," clarifying that he wanted more support "just in general life stuff. Maybe offer a cooking class". At the same time, he reports no ongoing adult support services: he was not connected to outside agencies, he doesn't currently have a case manager or anyone to reach out to if he needs added life support. In Self-Determination Theory (SDT) terms, while school-based transition activities may have fostered autonomy and competence around interests and academic tasks, the absence of explicit instruction in daily living, finances, and navigation of adult systems, and the lack of post-school supports, constrained his ability to translate that internal growth into independent living outcomes (as reflected in researcher notes that he has never held a job, did not complete postsecondary education, and continues to live at home).

Blossom's narrative strongly illustrates Theme 4, as she repeatedly names areas where she lacked life-skills and practical "adulting" instruction, even while her academic/vocational path was relatively clear. She describes profound mental health struggles, noting that during COVID, staying home for Zoom classes left her "in bed" because "I'm depressed all the time," emphasizing that "school was my safe place" rather than home. Beyond academics, she calls for "more job program" and admits that in job interviews, "I feel like I need more support there...

what if they ask you question?... I guess that's a hard part", highlighting missing instruction in how to present herself, answer questions, and access employment. She also wants more explicit help with "the living situation and more resources" and wishes schools made students more aware of different services that are available like "211... they help you... housing assistance, food, clothing, healthcare, job training," so "students cannot be stressed out... when their parents needed help" (211 is a texting service that will connect families with service providers with assistance). In the realm of relationships and health, she asks for "more sex education," explaining that she "used to have... chlamydia... two times" because she "wasn't using protective sex" and was having sex because she "was sad"; she now fears "HIV and AIDS" and other infections like syphilis. Socially, she says she wanted "more socialized classes" because she has "trouble... socialized with people, especially clients". From an SDT perspective, Blossom' experience shows a partial but incomplete fulfillment of basic psychological needs. Her transition plan strongly supported autonomy and created pockets of competence around a specific career goal (cosmetology), yet the broader system did not fully nurture her relatedness or her general life competence. Significant gaps in life-skills instruction and practical supports; across work, housing, health, and relationships, undermined her overall sense of competence and connection. As a result, she developed a strong awareness of what she should have had (job programs, life-resources education, sexual health, and social communication support), but remained underprepared for the emotional, social, and practical demands of adult life beyond the IEP and school setting.

Across all seven interviews, participants described feeling that school had left notable gaps in the very skills they needed to navigate adult life, even when they felt reasonably prepared in academics or socially. They repeatedly named money management, navigating bureaucratic

paperwork, and everyday “adulting” tasks as areas where they wished they had received explicit, structured instruction. For example, Yessica talked about wanting classes on “day to day life, not just English and math,” including how to buy a car, understand credit, do taxes, open a bank account, and manage basic financial responsibilities; she connected the absence of this instruction to feeling like a “late bloomer” as she tried to step into adult roles after graduation. Gerry similarly wished for a finance class that would have prepared him to fill out tax and employment forms and apply for health insurance, recalling how overwhelming it felt to confront questions about income and benefits without having learned what those terms meant in school. Bobby valued the personal finance course he took but regretted not having more opportunities and earlier exposure to that kind of content; he wished he had taken finance more seriously and advocated for more trade-oriented electives like auto mechanics and other hands-on classes that clearly connected to real jobs and responsibilities. Even Declan, who felt that school had helped him with “adult” tasks such as creating a resume and preparing for job interviews, also noted that he didn’t encounter the trades pathway that ultimately fit him, electrician training, until after high school, highlighting how limited the formal exploration of practical postsecondary options had been.

Connection to Research Question

Across all four themes, the most effective transition activities were those that built actionable competence, skills participants could actually use or imagine using in adult life. Hands-on, career-linked experiences and interest-based electives both fostered confidence, but only the former translated into sustained preparation for adulthood; interest-based classes built belonging without pathways, while formal planning and life-skills instruction remained disconnected from the real work of becoming independent. The data suggests that for students

with BIF, transition activities are only truly preparatory when they integrate three elements: skill-building that feels tangible, choice that feels honored, and explicit bridges to adult responsibilities and roles.

RQ C. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?

To analyze this research question, I looked closely at moments when participants described obstacles, missing supports, or points where plans did not translate into real help. Through iterative coding, I tagged references to limited opportunities, confusing or absent services, unmet needs around skills and information, and internal factors that made it hard to use available supports. I then compared these codes across interviews to identify recurring patterns that spoke directly to how transition systems fell short in preparing students with BIF for adult life.

From this analysis, I distilled four interrelated themes that captured the core barriers and gaps participants experienced: (1) Limited Access to Career-Aligned or Vocational Coursework, (2) Insufficient Instruction in Practical Life Skills or “Adulting” Tasks, (3) Weak and Inconsistent Connection to External Supports and Meaningful Transition Planning, and (4) Confidence, Motivation, and Social-Emotional Barriers That Shaped How Students Engaged with Available Opportunities. While there is intentional overlap among themes across the research questions, this convergence reflects the recurring patterns in participants’ experiences and, rather than weakening the analysis, reinforces and strengthens the credibility of the findings by showing that the same core issues surfaced from multiple analytic angles. These themes were selected because they appeared consistently across all participants, were strongly grounded in the coded data and analytic memos, and together offered a coherent framework for understanding

how structural constraints and internal challenges intersected to limit students’ autonomy, sense of competence, and ability to build sustained connections as they moved into adulthood.

Table 7

RQ C Themes and Participants

RQ C Themes	Highlighted Stories	Total Participant Involvement with Theme
<u>Limited access</u> to career-aligned or vocational coursework	Yessica, Xander	7 of 7 participants described constraints in accessing career-aligned, vocational, or CTE coursework that directly matched their interests or goals (e.g., limited options, scheduling conflicts, late exposure, or absence of relevant pathways).
<u>Insufficient</u> instruction in practical life skills or “ <u>adulting</u> ” tasks	Lee, Yessica	7 of 7 participants mentioned gaps in at least one practical life domain (money, forms, transportation, housing, benefits, health, or daily living), framing these as barriers to feeling prepared for adult life.
<u>Weak and inconsistent connection to external supports</u> and meaningful transition planning	Declan, Gerry	7 of 7 participants indicated that agencies, community resources, or postschool supports were either not mentioned, mentioned only briefly, or not experienced as coherent, ongoing connections.
<u>Confidence, motivation, and social-emotional barriers</u> that shaped how students engaged with available opportunities.	Blossom, Xander	7 of 7 participants described internal factors; such as anxiety, low confidence, overwhelm, or depression, that affected whether and how they engaged with school, planning processes, or available opportunities.

Limited access to career-aligned or vocational coursework

Yessica’s story illustrates how limited access to career-aligned courses left a gap between her high school program and her actual career goals. She explains that she had “always talked about being a preschool teacher” and had long enjoyed caring for younger children, yet when asked whether the school offered child development electives, she simply responds, “No”.

Instead, she remembers electives like ceramics and a homework support class, these were both helpful for engagement and belonging, but not connected to early childhood education. In SDT terms, school supported some relatedness and competence (e.g., feeling part of a community), but did not provide autonomy-supportive pathways that allowed her to pursue courses meaningfully aligned with her vocational interests.

Because of this misalignment, her pathway into her preferred career now feels delayed and uncertain. She describes herself as “such a late bloomer” and characterizes the move from high school to college and adult life as “a big jump”, for which she did not feel prepared. Although she now wants to go back and major in child development, she says she still needs “that extra motivation to tell me, like, just do it and see what happens”, and worries about academic habits shaped by overreliance on accommodations and tools like ChatGPT. From an SDT perspective, the earlier lack of career-aligned coursework appears to have weakened her sense of autonomous motivation and competence for pursuing her chosen field, leaving her now in need of more structured, external supports to re-enter college and follow through on her preschool-teaching goal.

Xander’s story depicts how limited access to career-aligned or vocational courses constrained his preparation for the healthcare field he was genuinely interested in. He explains that his interest in healthcare was longstanding and relationally grounded: it was “interesting to me, because... my other siblings also took, like, health care classes as well,” and both his brother and sister are “nurses”. Despite this clear interest, when asked whether he took any healthcare classes in high school, he responds, “None that I remember... No, yeah. I don't believe there were any”. He later reflects that he “probably... should have” taken healthcare classes “if they were here”. From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective, the absence of health-related

electives or vocational pathways meant the school context did little to support career-specific competence or autonomy, depriving him of structured opportunities to build skills and confidence in the very domain he hoped to pursue (nursing, then radiology).

These gaps were compounded by the fact that Xander had to use significant schedule space to retake foundational courses in order to move from a certificate track to a diploma track. He had to retake multiple foundational courses in high school to meet diploma requirements, including “two English classes”, which took up schedule space that might otherwise have been used for electives. This remediation load likely limited his ability to explore career-aligned classes, contributing to a schedule focused more on catching up than on developing skills and exposure related to his healthcare interests. As a result, his schedule was filled with remediation rather than exploration of career-aligned options, even as his transition plan noted an interest in healthcare and the local community college. In SDT terms, while the push toward a diploma may have bolstered his general academic competence and self-esteem, the lack of accessible, aligned vocational coursework narrowed his opportunities to exercise autonomous choice in building a healthcare pathway, contributing to his feeling less prepared for the specific postschool field he hoped to enter.

Xander and Yessica’s stories about lackluster course offerings that matched their transition goals were not isolated. All seven of the participants’ stories show limited access to career-aligned or vocational coursework was not an isolated issue but a pervasive pattern. Blossom, who aspired to work in nail tech, makeup, and cosmetology, moved through high school without classes directly tied to those interests, instead piecing together electives that never fully matched her goals. Lee found joy and talent in graphic design and pottery, even investing in a pottery wheel after graduation, yet still lacked structured pathways that connected those

strengths to viable careers. Bobby, a hands-on learner who later thrived in trades-oriented work, noted that options like an auto class were never available, limiting his ability to explore fields that ultimately fit him best. Gerry discovered his true fit in wood shop and carpentry, but his transition plan emphasized more generic “technology” goals, and he wished for more mechanics or trade offerings that reflected the work he now does successfully. Similarly, Declan only learned about and entered the electrician trade after leaving high school and cycling through the local community college, underscoring how little systematic exposure he received to trade pathways while still a student. Across these cases, all participants managed to find or build adult identities in spite of, but not because of, a robust menu of career-aligned coursework, highlighting a significant gap in transition planning for college- and career-readiness.

Insufficient Life-Skills / “Adulthood” Preparation

All participants pointed to a lack of explicit instruction in practical adult skills: finances, forms, independent living, and navigating systems. In this section, I show how these gaps left young people feeling unprepared to manage basic responsibilities and interactions with institutions, even when they had met academic requirements or secured employment. Their accounts reveal how the absence of structured “adulthood” preparation functioned as a barrier to autonomy, stability, and confidence after high school.

Lee’s story clarifies how limited life-skills and “adulthood” preparation constrained his readiness for post-school demands, even as he navigated high school academically and socially. When reflecting on what was missing, he immediately identified “financial things like taxes and stuff like that,” suggesting “maybe a tax person could come in,” and stressing, “I don’t want to get fined for that”. He broadened this to “life skills and money in general” and added that schools should offer “just in general life stuff. Maybe offer a cooking class”. From an SDT perspective,

these comments highlight a perceived lack of competence in core adult tasks; he understood the real-world consequences but did not receive structured, autonomy-supportive instruction to build mastery in these areas.

At the same time, Lee reports having no formal adult services or coordinated supports after high school. He notes that he was not connected to outside agencies, “I don’t believe” and confirms he does not “have a case manager now” or anyone he meets with “once a year...to help you with job, life, money, career”. Combined with contextual information that he has never held a job, has not completed a postsecondary program, and is not yet driving or living independently, his experience reflects a transition characterized by self-directed trial and error rather than a guided plan. In SDT terms, the post-school environment offered little ongoing autonomy support or scaffolding of competence in real-world domains, leaving him to shoulder the burden of “adulthood” largely on his own.

Yessica also frames many of her postschool struggles as gaps in “adulthood” and college-navigation skills rather than pure academics. She describes herself as “such a late bloomer” and says that moving from high school into college and adult life was “a big jump”, one she did not feel ready for. Although she managed “basically almost two years” of college, she explains that she lost motivation, leaned heavily on tools like ChatGPT, and ultimately did not complete key requirements. Now, even as she talks about wanting to go back and major in child development, she emphasizes that she needs extra support or motivation to help her attempt to complete a teaching degree. In self-determination theory (SDT) terms, she portrays a fragile sense of competence and autonomous motivation for navigating college on her own, and a strong need for more structured planning and external scaffolding to take the next step.

She is even more explicit about missing concrete instruction in everyday adult skills. Comparing her own high school experience to a peer's, she notes that at his school "he learns about how to buy a car and how to do mortgage and how to like, get good credit... Why don't we get taught those things?" She argues that schools should provide "day to day life things, life skills, like... taxes... opening up a bank account", and admits, "I haven't done taxes yet still," linking this lack of knowledge directly to feeling less confident seeking help and making independent decisions. While she has a driver's license, a car, and has held small part-time jobs, she still lives at home and describes herself as not yet truly "there... for a reason" in terms of career and adult independence. From an SDT perspective, these missing life-skills experiences have constrained her perceived competence in adult roles and limited the development of autonomous, self-directed pathways into work and postsecondary education.

Across participants' stories, insufficient life-skills or "adulting" preparation emerged as a nearly universal concern, shaping where they live, how they work, and how independently they function. None of the participants currently lives outside of their childhood home, and all described concrete gaps in skills that might support more independent living. Blossom, for example, continues to live with her family while navigating complex needs around housing, money, and mental health, and she has not obtained a driver's license, relying on others for transportation and system navigation. Xander likewise remains at home, focused on school but not yet driving, and he continues to struggle with job search, confidence, and social communication, all of which are tied to life-skills that were never taught explicitly. While Lee is also non-driving and living at home, similar patterns show up for participants who do drive as well: their adult roles are still constrained. Only two participants, Gerry and Bobby, are working full time on a consistent basis, and both of them described feeling underprepared in key adulting

domains such as finances, forms, and long-term planning, even as they manage regular employment. Declan, who eventually found a good fit in the electrician trade, still reached that point through trial and error rather than structured preparation in money management, independent living, or systems navigation during high school. Viewed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, these gaps in life-skills instruction undermine students' sense of competence in managing adult tasks and erode autonomy, as participants remain dependent on family for housing, transportation, and decision-making support. In this way, the absence of systematic "adulting" preparation limits not only their practical readiness for adulthood but also their ability to act as self-determined agents in their own lives.

Weak Connection to Supports, Agencies, and Meaningful Transition Planning

High school was often the primary, and sometimes only, site where participants encountered transition-related support. Yet the bridge to life after graduation was tenuous at best. While 3 of the 7 participants recalled brief mentions of agencies, services, or future planning, their narratives reveal a persistent disconnect between what was offered on paper and what they actually accessed in early adulthood, since none of the participants accessed agencies after high school. Instead of a coordinated web of school-based supports and community resources, most described fragmented, sporadic, or poorly explained linkages to disability services, postschool programs, and other formal supports. In practice, references to outside agencies appeared only in passing in formal plans, and students were not equipped or invited to see themselves as active navigators of these systems.

Declan's story highlights how "plans on paper" did not translate into strong, lived connections to supports or agencies during his transition out of high school. Although his ITP referenced community college, he recalls that in high school he was "unsure what [he] wanted to

study,” and when he actually went to the local community college he “didn’t like it” and “didn’t know what to major in,” so he “felt like [he] was just doing the classes”. This suggests that the local community college functioned more as a default destination than a self-endorsed goal. He also reports no linkage to adult agencies or disability supports at the point of transition: when asked about the Department of Rehab, Regional Center, or registering with disability services in college, he answers, “Actually? No, I didn’t. I just, I just felt like I could have handled it”. From a self-determination perspective, this reflects a situation where formal structures existed (IEP, ITP, college option) but were only thinly connected to his own sense of purpose or to ongoing external scaffolding; his autonomy needs (making truly meaningful choices) and relatedness needs (being connected to a supportive network of adult services) were not fully met.

Instead, Declan’s genuine career path emerged more slowly and informally through family and hands-on work, rather than through intentional transition planning. After high school, he went to the local community college while working “full time construction,” trying “different trades to like, see what I like,” and it was then that he “found out I like electrician, and that’s when I wanted to take the trade school and pursue my career on that”. He notes that in high school he “didn’t... hear nothing about electrician... [or] trades at all”, indicating that his required course of study did little to expose him to vocational options that actually fit him. Ultimately, it took several years, full-time work, and family connections, “The company I wanna work for is my dad, because he’s a... general contractor”, for him to land on a satisfying, self-determined path. Through an SDT lens, Declan’s case exemplifies a weak connection between school-based planning and real postschool supports: while he had IEP meetings and an ITP, the lack of agency linkages, trade exposure, and authentically co-constructed goals meant his basic needs for autonomy, competence in a clear direction, and relatedness to a broader support system

were only fully addressed after high school, through his own trial-and-error rather than through meaningful transition planning.

Gerry's narrative illustrates how transition planning can exist structurally but feel thin in practice, with weak relational ties to the very supports meant to guide him. He recalls attending only one high school IEP meeting and describes his role as largely passive: he reports that he "was just there," sitting quietly while his mom was present and even "thought [he] was getting in trouble," speaking up only when directly asked. Later, when asked about programs like Workability and specific staff, he shows little recognition, and in college, although he did register his IEP, he explains that he "never asked for help" and "didn't really care." In SDT terms, these experiences signal low autonomy and relatedness within the transition-planning system: he was technically "included" but not supported to feel like an active, connected co-author of his own plan.

He also positions himself as a "middle" student who fell between the cracks, he "wasn't struggling enough," didn't "even know who" his first case manager was until that person left, and then was "switched... to another lady" he also didn't know. From his perspective, co-teachers in general education classes "basically... were watching [him]," while his case managers remained distant and his mom was the primary adult driving concern about his progress. This combination of weak relatedness to transition staff and underdeveloped autonomy in planning meant that, although supports and agencies were technically present, they did not translate into strong self-advocacy, sustained use of services, or a deeply meaningful, student-led transition plan. Gerry's story thus exemplifies a "plan on paper" model in which the formal transition plan exists, but SDT needs; especially for relatedness and autonomous involvement, are not fully met, limiting the real impact of those supports on his adult trajectory.

Across participants, Theme 3 shows a consistent pattern: transition systems were present on paper but thin in lived impact. Most students recalled having IEPs, transition pages, and at least some discussion of postsecondary goals, yet they tended to describe themselves as passive attendees rather than active co-planners. Meetings were often experienced as something happening to them or around them, led primarily by adults (teachers, case managers, parents), with students speaking only when prompted or offering what they perceived as “right” answers rather than authentic goals. Connections to adult agencies were typically vague, forgotten, or described as one-off contacts that never became ongoing relationships. Even when students technically registered with disability services in college, at least 2 participants noted that they did not follow through with accommodations or advocacy, suggesting that the transition planning they received did not sufficiently build their comfort or skills in using those supports.

From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, this theme reflects chronically under-met needs for autonomy and relatedness within the transition-planning ecosystem. Students rarely felt like autonomous agents in these processes; instead, plans were perceived as documents completed to satisfy school requirements rather than living guides they owned and understood. Likewise, relationships with key transition adults; especially case managers and external agency staff, were often weak, inconsistent, or short-lived, which reduced students’ sense of being known, supported, and invited into genuine collaboration. As a result, even when transition services were technically in place, all participants entered adulthood without strong self-advocacy habits, without a clear understanding of available supports, and without a deeply internalized roadmap for navigating college, work, and services after high school. This “plan on paper, thin in practice” pattern underscores that the quality of student involvement and relationships may matter as much as the mere presence of formal transition plans.

Confidence, Motivation, and Social-Emotional Barriers

Across participants' stories, the availability of supports on paper did not automatically translate into their effective use in practice. Internal factors, such as self-confidence, motivation, and emotional wellbeing, all played a pivotal role in whether young people could reach out for help, persist with applications, or self-advocate in unfamiliar settings. Even when programs and accommodations were technically within reach, anxiety, depression, and feelings of being overwhelmed frequently impeded follow-through. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, this section examines how unmet needs for competence and relatedness, expressed through self-doubt, avoidance, or social withdrawal, interacted with external barriers to shape whether participants could meaningfully engage with postschool supports.

Blossom's account illustrates how confidence and mental health shaped her ability to benefit from transition supports and to function in adult roles. Academically, she describes feeling more competent only in tightly structured, smaller (separate setting) classes: in math she “feels more confident because I understand the whole thing,” while in large science classes she was “over here, like, I don't, I don't understand. Can you show me...like, is that a reference? I don't know what that means”. Socially and vocationally, she explicitly links low confidence and skill gaps to struggles with real-world interaction, saying she wished she was able to take classes that helped her focus on socialization and communication because she is “having trouble, socializing with people, especially clients, so I'm struggling with that”. She also reports that job interviews are daunting and that she “feel like I need more support there... what if they ask you question?... I guess that's a hard part”. From an SDT lens, these comments suggest that while certain school contexts supported her sense of competence, she often lacked the social-emotional

and communication supports needed to feel capable and confident using transition opportunities in more complex, interpersonal environments.

Her mental health and sense of belonging also constrained how fully she could engage with school and later adult supports. She notes that even in high school she did not really feel she belonged, “I would say, not really” when asked about having a place or group that felt like hers, and connects this to “so much emotion that people don't understand” and “most of the trauma is blocked”. During COVID, remote learning intensified these struggles: she explains that being at home on Zoom meant “I'm in bed. And the reason why I'm in bed because I'm depressed. I'm depressed all the time,” contrasting that with in-person school, where she could “get up, get ready and just go” and describing school as her “safe place”. She also describes ongoing difficulties communicating both in therapy and with her parents, recalling that at speech therapy she had “hard time explaining myself” and that when asked to define something as simple as an umbrella she could only say “I don't know. It just umbrella... it “helps you prevent rain”, and at home, when her parents (who use a mix of ASL and Vietnamese Sign Language) try to explain what they want, she often responds internally with “I don't know what you're talking about. I'm so sorry”. She further asks for “more sex education” and shares that she “used to have... chlamydia... two times” because she “wasn't using protective sex” and was having sex because she “was sad”. Taken together, these excerpts show that gaps in emotional support, sexual health education, and communication undermined all three SDT needs; competence (not feeling able to navigate interviews, client interactions, or health risks), relatedness (limited sense of belonging with peers or family), and even autonomy (coping through risky behavior rather than feeling empowered to make protective choices). As a result, the transition supports she did receive were

filtered through persistent social-emotional barriers that limited how fully she could use them in her post-school life.

Xander's story shows how confidence, self-advocacy, and social-emotional factors shaped his ability to take advantage of transition supports and opportunities. He repeatedly describes himself as shy and reserved, noting, "I was facing a little bit of... confidence issues... I am a bit introverted so kind of hard for me to truly, like, put myself out there" when trying to apply or interview for jobs. Looking back on his IEP meetings, he recalls attending "all of them" but describes his role as "just kind of there listening... like, all the feedback, you know, everything else" rather than actively voicing his needs or preferences. From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) lens, these comments highlight ongoing challenges with autonomy (feeling able to speak up and shape decisions) and social competence, which likely limited how fully he could use the formal planning structures and resources that were technically available to him.

At the same time, the shift from a certificate of completion pathway to a diploma track gradually strengthened his motivation and sense of capability, even as it constrained other opportunities. When asked how it felt to move from a non-diploma track to a diploma, he explains that he felt "a lot more better... I felt like I was in, like, in, like, the wrong place" before, and that after the switch "especially my self esteem... went up a lot". He remembers needing to double up on core courses, "Yeah, two English classes", to catch up academically, which built his school-related competence and drive to graduate but also consumed schedule space that might otherwise have supported exploration and social connection. Even in college, he notes that being "reserved" in his personality makes it harder to "make connections in college or jobs," and he agrees he could have benefited from "some social support... helping with, like friends and social conversations and... getting started and going from just like a quick

conversation to like a friendship”. Taken together, Xander’s narrative underscores how gains in academic confidence coexisted with persistent social-emotional barriers, which shaped both the kinds of transition experiences he could access and how fully he could benefit from them.

Connection to Research Question

Across all four themes, barriers to successful transition operated on two levels: structural (limited course options, gaps in life-skills instruction, fragmented agency connections) and internal (low confidence, anxiety, overwhelm). Critically, these barriers were not separate challenges but deeply intertwined; students with the fewest external resources were often those facing the greatest internal obstacles, creating a compounding effect that made it difficult to advocate for themselves or navigate available supports. The data suggests that for students with BIF, transition support fails not because individual pieces are missing, but because structural gaps erode the confidence and motivation needed to seek help, and low confidence makes students less likely to persist when systems are fragmented or unclear.

A Note On ‘COVID’

COVID-19 emerged in the interviews as a salient contextual factor rather than a primary focus of students’ narratives. Across the seven interviews, participants explicitly referenced “COVID” or “the pandemic” roughly a dozen times, with mentions concentrated in five cases: Gerry, Bobby, Lee, Blossom, and Yessica. Students most often linked COVID to disrupted schooling during key transition years, shifts to online learning, and changes in their academic motivation or access to supports. For example, Bobby discussed how his senior year overlapped with COVID and how that period affected his motivation and school participation, while Gerry noted that his freshman year fell during COVID, framing it as an unusual starting point for high school.

Other participants specifically connected COVID to memory gaps, emotional strain, or altered use of accommodations. Lee described his memory as “spotty... especially because COVID,” suggesting that the pandemic period and getting COVID himself, blurred his recollection of classes and supports. Blossom reflected that “COVID was a bummer for a lot of kids,” tying the pandemic to Zoom classes, depression, and reduced engagement with school. Yessica explained that she relied on her IEP accommodations more heavily during her sophomore and junior years “because... it was COVID,” indicating that remote or altered instruction changed how she accessed support. Taken together, these brief but recurring references position COVID-19 as a cross-cutting context that intensified existing challenges around engagement, mental health, and consistency of transition support, even though it was not the central topic of the interviews.

Conclusion

Across all seven participants, the findings from Chapter 4 show that individualized transition plans were experienced as both supportive and constrained in ways that closely map onto the three basic needs of Self-Determination Theory (SDT): autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Most students described strong relationships with teachers and case managers, smaller (separate setting) or co-taught classes, and tailored academic supports that helped them graduate, stay organized, and feel known; clear indicators of relatedness and school-based competence. Four participants also reported feeling involved or “having a voice” in IEP and transition meetings, suggesting moments where autonomy was actively supported. At the same time, others entered this process late or continued to experience meetings as largely adult-driven, attending but not truly shaping decisions. These patterns point to a mixed picture in which

transition planning sometimes fostered, and sometimes limited, students' opportunity to practice self-advocacy and ownership over their futures.

Findings related to specific transition activities highlight a similar combination of strengths and gaps. Interest-based and hands-on electives (e.g., ceramics, art, woodworking, personal finance) and work experiences or on-the-job training were consistently named as the most impactful preparation for adulthood, especially when they connected directly to later employment or postsecondary training. These experiences tended to build competence in practical, real-world tasks and sometimes reinforced autonomy, as students chose courses and work aligned with their preferences. Participants also valued college tours, goal-setting conversations, and resume/interview preparation as supports for exploring interests and clarifying next steps. However, they simultaneously reported limited, fragmented, or late access to structured vocational pathways, trade exploration, and life-skills instruction (e.g., money management, navigating systems, housing, health insurance), indicating that their sense of competence often remained school-bound and only partially transferable to adult contexts. In other words, hands-on, career-linked experiences provided some of the strongest preparation, yet access to them, as well as to explicit "adulting" instruction, was uneven and constrained.

When describing their overall transition supports, young adults with BIF characterized them as academically and relationally strong, but not always aligned with authentic interests and long-term adult needs. For some, particularly those whose plans accurately reflected their goals (such as cosmetology or hands-on work) and were backed by concrete steps, transition planning supported all three SDT needs: they felt seen (relatedness), capable in relevant skills (competence), and able to pursue self-endorsed goals (autonomy). For others, alignment was more symbolic. Plans referenced general interests like "healthcare" or "going to college," but did

not provide enough career-aligned coursework, work-based learning, life-skills instruction, or agency connections to turn those goals into reality. Across cases, participants pointed to inconsistent links to outside agencies and a sharp drop-off in formal support after graduation, leaving them to rely heavily on family or postschool trial-and-error. These structural gaps were compounded by social-emotional barriers; such as low confidence, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed, that made it difficult to seek help or navigate complex systems, even when supports technically existed.

Taken together, these themes above suggest four interrelated findings in how students experienced transition planning:

- (1) self-determination depended on confidence, self-advocacy, and meaningful participation in planning
- (2) relationships, interest-based learning, and career-linked experiences as foundations for motivation and postschool success
- (3) persistent gaps in life-skills and “adulting” instruction left students feeling unprepared for everyday adult responsibilities; and
- (4) fragmented connections to external agencies and supports, combined with social-emotional challenges, undermined students’ ability to use available resources.

These findings frame the discussion in Chapter 5, where I consider their implications for self-determination, educational equity, and the design of more responsive transition systems for young adults with BIF.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings from this qualitative multiple case study design, incorporating cross-case analysis and how young adults with borderline intellectual functioning (BIF) experienced transition support in high school and how those experiences shaped their engagement and outcomes after graduation. Guided by a self-determination lens and a focus on educational equity, the study examined how autonomy, competence, and relatedness influenced students' academic engagement, transition planning, and early adult pathways. The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of students with BIF in order to identify how self-determination factors contribute to their long-term outcomes and to generate insights into how schools can better address their needs and help close the achievement and/or opportunity gap. As outlined in Chapter 1, this study addressed one overarching research question and three subquestions concerning how BIF graduates experienced and were shaped by individualized transition planning.

As outlined in Chapter 2, I noted that BIF, typically defined by IQ scores between 70 and 85, is not a formally recognized eligibility category under IDEA, despite the statute's 13 qualifying disability classifications. As a result, students with BIF who do receive special education services are most often supported under other eligibility labels (e.g., Specific Learning Disability, Other Health Impairment, or Emotional Disturbance), while others with similar cognitive profiles may never qualify for any services at all. The participants in this study represent the subset of students with BIF who were found eligible for special education and had IEPs, even though their primary eligibility did not explicitly name BIF. This contextual point is critical for interpreting the findings: the transition experiences, levels of school-based support, and postschool outcomes described in this chapter reflect the realities of young adults who were

both navigating the challenges associated with BIF and doing so within the constraints and affordances of an eligibility system that does not formally acknowledge their cognitive profile. Consequently, the discussion that follows should be understood as speaking not only to the effectiveness of transition planning for this group, but also to the broader policy gap that leaves many students with BIF under-identified, inconsistently served, and at continued risk for unmet needs in the transition to adulthood. Situated within this policy and identification context, the study's findings illuminate how participants experienced transition planning, how they made sense of support during and after high school, and where current practices fell short for students with BIF.

The four findings outlined in Chapter 4 are interpreted here through the lenses of prior scholarship, equity, and practice. The remainder of this chapter is organized around these four findings. Together, they address Research Question 1 by illustrating how self-determination, rooted in competence, autonomy, and relatedness, shaped students' motivation and capacity to navigate life after high school. They respond to Research Question A by clarifying which transition activities were most beneficial and where formal planning, coursework, and electives fell short. Finally, they address Research Question B and C by detailing the interlocking barriers and gaps in life-skills preparation, access to vocational opportunities, and connections to agencies that left participants feeling under-prepared and under-supported as adults.

For each of these findings, I also examine how the evidence confirms, extends, or challenges existing scholarship on self-determination, secondary transition, and the education of students with BIF. The sections that follow discuss implications for social justice, educational leadership, policy and education specialists, and future research, arguing that supporting students with BIF in their transitions to adulthood requires not only technical improvements to programs

and plans, but also a deeper moral commitment to their dignity, a critical understanding of the systems that constrain them, and sustained relational work that centers their voices and self-determination.

Interpreting The First Finding

Self-determination was contingent on confidence, self-advocacy, and meaningful participation in planning

Participants' accounts consistently underscored that self-determination was not a static trait, but something they could exercise only when they felt competent, confident, and genuinely invited into decision-making about their futures. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundational psychological needs that support motivation and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008). When students described teachers who listened, explained options in accessible ways, and encouraged them to speak up, they reported feeling more capable of navigating classes, work experiences, and postschool plans. This echoes research showing that autonomy-supportive environments foster greater wellbeing and engagement (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). For young people with BIF, this resonates with Frielink et al.'s (2018) finding that autonomy support and need satisfaction are especially critical to goal pursuit and quality of life, suggesting that seemingly small shifts in how adults structure conversations and choices can have outsized effects on students' sense of agency.

At the same time, the study extends existing scholarship by illustrating how confidence and self-advocacy are built, or undermined, through the micro-interactions of transition planning and everyday school life. Prior work highlights the importance of centering students in transition processes and writing goals from the student's perspective (Furney & Salembier, 2000; Ward, 2005), as well as providing meaningful opportunities for students to explore courses and express

preferences (Brady et al., 2021; Cavendish et al., 2019). Participants in this study confirmed these insights: those who were asked what they wanted, given real choices in electives or work experiences, and supported to ask questions described stronger motivation to graduate and clearer postschool aims. However, the narratives here add nuance by showing how quickly self-determination can erode when participation is reduced to “just sitting there” in meetings where adults talk over or around students. In such contexts, even formally “student-centered” tools, such as ITP forms or goal-setting worksheets, failed to produce a felt sense of autonomy or competence, revealing the limits of procedural compliance without deep relational practice.

The findings also challenge the assumption that offering nominal choice is sufficient to foster self-determination, particularly for students at the margins of traditional disability categories. While prior research on student voice emphasizes the value of involving youth in transition planning (Brady et al., 2021; Cook-Sather, 2020), participants’ stories illustrate that choice without adequate scaffolding, clear information, or emotional safety can leave students confused, overwhelmed, or inclined toward quiet compliance. Moreover, echoing Cook-Sather’s (2020) critique of how autonomy and postsecondary readiness are unevenly supported across student groups, this study suggests that young people with BIF may be especially likely to receive limited or inconsistent opportunities to practice self-advocacy, even when they are included in planning. In this way, the data both confirm the importance of autonomy support identified by SDT scholars (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Frielink et al., 2018) and push the field to reckon with how structural constraints, low expectations, and ableist assumptions can hollow out “student-centered” practices, leaving self-determination contingent not only on internal skills but on whether adults and systems truly make room for students’ voices to matter.

Interpreting The Second Finding

Relationships, Interest-Based Learning, and Career-Linked Experiences as Foundations for Motivation and Postschool Success

In this study, participants' narratives underscored that relationships and interest-based spaces were central to sustaining their motivation and sense of belonging in high school, yet these powerful motivational contexts rarely translated into concrete postschool pathways. Participants described feeling most engaged and "like themselves" in classes and programs where they had strong connections with teachers, staff, or peers and could pursue activities aligned with their interests, contexts that clearly supported the psychological need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000; 2008). Consistently, participants from this study identified hands-on, career-linked electives, work experiences, and vocational coursework as the most meaningful preparation they received for adulthood. These experiences helped them acquire concrete, job-relevant skills, develop more realistic expectations about work, and in some cases earn credentials that acknowledged competence to employers. When coursework and work experiences were clearly connected to potential careers, participants reported feeling more motivated to attend school, more confident in their skills, and better prepared to imagine themselves as workers.

The study confirms that strong relationships, interest-based environments and hands-on, career-linked experiences can be powerful engines of confidence and intrinsic motivation. For the young people with BIF in this study, such relatedness and practical skill-building were closely tied to feeling competent and valued, echoing findings that satisfaction of relatedness needs is critical for subjective well-being in this population (Frielink et al., 2018). Participants' accounts align with research emphasizing how healthy relationships with families and educators

help ensure that students' interests and abilities are meaningfully considered in transition planning (Brady et al., 2021). Their stories resonate with a robust body of evidence showing that high-quality Career and Technical Education (CTE) and work-based learning significantly improve outcomes for secondary students, including those with disabilities. For example, students engaged in CTE are substantially less likely to drop out in 11th and 12th grade (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018; Shaw, 2008), and in California, CTE participants show higher rates of college readiness, A–G completion (57% vs. 36%), and on-time graduation (90% vs. 75% overall; California Department of Education, n.d.). In particular, the few participants from this study who accessed more robust vocational tracks or postsecondary options described clearer next steps and, in some cases, more stable employment, reinforcing the argument that career-linked and vocational opportunities are not peripheral add-ons but central to equitable transition for students with BIF.

The study extends existing scholarship by revealing how these relational and interest-based spaces, as well as hands-on learning experiences, rarely translated into clear postschool pathways, even when they were the primary sites of student engagement. While prior work on career and technical education and transition emphasizes that when stakeholders; educators, families, employers, and disability service providers, intentionally collaborate, they can connect students' interests to concrete career-linked experiences and expanded opportunities (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018), participants in this study seldom encountered the kind of coordinated partnerships that would turn those interests into structured pathways. Instead, for many of the participants, favorite electives and trusted adults often remained siloed from formal transition planning, resulting in a disconnect between where students felt most competent and the postschool options that were named on their individualized transition plans. Participants in this

study showed greater interest in school and stronger commitment to graduating when coursework felt relevant to their futures (Shaw, 2008), however, they seldom encountered the kind of coordinated partnerships necessary to convert these interests into structured pathways.

The study also situates these powerful experiences within the longer path of participants' early adult trajectories. Prior research has documented that postsecondary education and supported employment yield substantial financial and social returns for individuals with disabilities and for society at large, including higher weekly wages (Whittenburg et al., 2019), significantly higher average annual salaries (Cimera et al., 2018), and positive net benefits from supported employment programs (Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019). The data from this study reinforce the argument that career-linked and vocational opportunities build not only skills but also the "currency" employers prioritize; job-specific competence and experience rather than diploma status alone (Smith & Smith, 2001).

These findings challenge the field to come to terms with the limits of emphasizing relationships and interests without simultaneously broadening and diversifying the actual options available to students. Scholars have noted that a lack of diversity in core and elective course offerings constrains the potential of relationship-building and interest-based learning to lead to authentic postschool opportunities (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). The experiences of participants in this study are a clear example of that concern: even when teachers knew students well and cared deeply about them, they often had few concrete pathways, such as aligned CTE sequences, dual-enrollment options, or supported work-based learning to which they could connect those interests.

The study also challenges the assumption that simply demonstrating the effectiveness of CTE and work-based learning will translate into broad, equitable access. Despite strong evidence

that such programs reduce dropout, increase graduation, and improve long-term economic outcomes (California Department of Education, n.d.; Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018; Shaw, 2008; Cimeria et al., 2018), participants from this study encountered CTE and vocational opportunities that were uneven, loosely connected to their actual interests, or entirely unavailable in their schools or districts. This aligns with concerns that not all high schools have programs that will further the career goals of students with disabilities and that access to robust pathways varies widely by context (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019).

In light of evidence that students without supported, coherent pathways are at heightened risk for dropout, unemployment, and involvement in the justice system (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Thurlow et al., 2002; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011), the missed opportunity to convert belonging into structured opportunity is not a minor gap but a significant equity issue. This study therefore both affirms the centrality of relatedness and interest in supporting self-determination and challenges schools and systems to move beyond cultivating motivation in isolation, toward designing concrete, diverse, and accessible pathways that grow directly out of the relationships and interests that already keep the participants in this study engaged.

Interpreting the Third Finding

Chronic gaps in life-skills and “adulting” instruction left students feeling unprepared to manage everyday adult responsibilities

Across participants’ narratives, one of the most consistent throughlines was a sense of being academically and, at times, socially supported in high school, yet fundamentally unprepared for the day-to-day tasks of adult life. Students described graduating without explicit instruction in managing money, paying bills, completing complex forms, arranging and navigating transportation, understanding leases and housing, or accessing public benefits and

services. These gaps echo longstanding concerns that many young adults with disabilities leave secondary school without the practical tools needed to sustain employment, manage finances, or live with greater independence, contributing to patterns of unemployment, underemployment, economic instability, and social isolation (Johnson & Sharpe, 2000). For participants with BIF, the absence of targeted life-skills instruction was particularly consequential: they often met diploma requirements and were expected to function in “typical” adult roles, but lacked structured opportunities to practice the skills those roles require.

The study confirms and deepens prior scholarship on transition planning by illustrating how formal processes frequently failed to translate into concrete, scaffolded preparation for independent living. While best-practice frameworks emphasize that transition planning should address postsecondary education, employment, and independent living in an integrated way; and that students’ course of study should align with these long-term goals (Brady et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2005) participants’ accounts suggest that independent living was often the least developed component. Budgeting, time management, and navigating bureaucratic systems were rarely addressed as explicit learning targets, and when they did appear in plans, they were seldom supported through sustained instruction or practice. This pattern is reinforced at a policy level: under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), independent living goals are only required when the IEP team deems them “necessary” for students pursuing a regular diploma, effectively making this domain optional rather than expected. For students with BIF, who often fall between systems, do not fit neatly into traditional diploma or certificate tracks, and whose nuanced needs are easily overlooked (Doll et al., 2013; Thurlow et al., 2002), this discretionary treatment of independent living goals meant that they could complete high school

having met formal requirements yet still feel ill-equipped to manage everyday responsibilities without significant ongoing help from family.

These findings also extend work on individualized supports and disengagement by showing how the absence of practical life-skills teaching can erode both self-efficacy and willingness to pursue further opportunities. Research has also shown that without individualized supports such as tailored instruction, appropriate accommodations, intentional transition services, and ongoing guidance, students with disabilities are more likely to disengage and experience limited adult outcomes (Cole et al., 2022). Participants here described precisely this dynamic: when confronted with unfamiliar tasks such as completing financial aid forms, applying for services, or arranging transportation to work, many felt overwhelmed, anxious, or ashamed, leading them to avoid opportunities, delay applications, or rely heavily on parents to “do it for them.” In a context where adults with disabilities already experience unemployment at roughly twice the rate of their nondisabled peers (Gonzales, 2023), these micro-level avoidance patterns compound into macro-level inequities in employment, education, and community participation (Peltopuro et al., 2014).

Finally, the study challenges the broader policy landscape by highlighting a stark mismatch between how resources are allocated and what students say they need. Stapleton and Livermore (2011) found that of the 429 billion dollars in state and federal spending for adults with disabilities in 2008, only 1.2 percent was devoted to programs aimed at employment and economic independence, while approximately 95 percent went to healthcare and income maintenance. Updated analyses of disability spending indicate that this pattern has largely persisted; Livermore, Shenk, and Stapleton (2019) report that public expenditures for adults with disabilities remain heavily concentrated in income maintenance and health care, with

comparatively limited investment in vocational rehabilitation and employment supports. Participants' stories of struggling with basic adulting tasks, often after years of schooling that did little to address these competencies, illustrate how this imbalance plays out on the ground: systems invest heavily in maintaining individuals once they are already economically marginalized, while underinvesting in the life-skills instruction and employment-focused supports that could foster greater autonomy earlier on. In this way, the chronic gaps in life-skills and "adulting" instruction documented in this study not only confirm existing concerns about postschool underpreparedness (Johnson & Sharpe, 2000; Peltopuro et al., 2014), but also call into question a policy system that treats practical independence as peripheral rather than central to the education of students with BIF.

Interpreting The Fourth Finding

Fragmented connections to external agencies and supports, compounded by social-emotional barriers, undermined the use of available resources

Participants' stories revealed that connections to external agencies and postschool supports were often thin, incidental, or left largely to families to navigate. Formal transition plans might list vocational rehabilitation, disability resource centers, or community programs, but these references were typically brief and rarely accompanied by concrete, supported next steps. In practice, students in this study were seldom positioned as informed navigators of complex systems; instead, they encountered agency names as lines on paperwork rather than as relationships, orientations, or jointly developed plans. As a result, even when opportunities technically existed, students often left high school with little understanding of what services were available, how to access them, or what their rights and options might be. In this way, the finding confirms long-standing concerns that, although ITP teams are supposed to include parents,

students, school staff, and when appropriate representatives from external agencies, the actual coordination among these actors is frequently fragmented and inconsistent (Brady et al., 2021; West, 2009).

At the same time, the finding extends existing scholarship by highlighting how fragmentation interacts with broader patterns of advantage and disadvantage, even when those patterns are not easily disaggregated in a small, single-site sample. Prior research shows that students from low-income households are disproportionately represented in special education and simultaneously have less access to high-quality instructional materials, individualized supports, and demanding academic pathways (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). English learners with cognitive or learning disabilities are at particular risk of being under-identified, misidentified, or moved between systems in ways that further complicate access to targeted services (Grindal et al., 2019; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Black and Latinx students are overrepresented in special education under more subjective disability categories and are often underserved in the very domains, such as autonomy, student voice, and postsecondary readiness, that Self-Determination Theory highlights as crucial (Cook-Sather, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Within this study's small sample of seven participants, there were no consistent patterns by race, language status, or socioeconomic background that could be confidently isolated as primary drivers of their experiences. However, their accounts still reflect the kinds of vulnerabilities that the broader literature associates with intersectional disadvantage. Participants described navigating fragmented systems, variable access to guidance, and expectations to "figure it out" with limited sustained support. These narratives suggest that, even when clear demographic patterns cannot be established, the intersection of disability label, multiple disabilities, academic

history, family context, and broader structural conditions can combine in ways that heighten the risk that students with BIF will not fully access the resources ostensibly available to them.

The fourth finding also challenges more optimistic narratives that the existence of transition mandates and formal linkages to agencies is sufficient to ensure equitable access to supports. Many participants reported significant anxiety, depressive symptoms, and feelings of overwhelm, responses that align with research showing that students with learning and cognitive disabilities are at elevated risk for mental health challenges and that rigid expectations without adequate support can erode intrinsic motivation and lead to withdrawal (Shaw, 2008; Peltopuro et al., 2014). Doll et al. (2013) argue that push factors such as lack of support, unattainable expectations, limited autonomy, and negative staff relationships are now among the most common reasons for dropout; similar dynamics were evident here in the transition to adulthood. When participants were handed phone numbers or websites with little explanation, or when they encountered bureaucratic hurdles and unwelcoming staff, many internalized these obstacles as personal failings rather than systemic issues. Low confidence, combined with prior experiences of not being fully heard in school settings, made it harder to pick up the phone, attend appointments alone, or persist when the first attempt went nowhere, amplifying the impact of already fragmented service systems. At a systems level, the finding challenges the assumption that inclusion and transition mandates alone have created coherent support structures. Inclusion practices remain uneven, and many practitioners report that academic leaders are unrealistic about the challenges facing students, teachers, and families, particularly when districts lack the flexibility or resources to craft truly individualized plans (Francisco et al., 2020; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). The National Council on Disability (2023) has documented a rise in legal cases in which districts are found to have failed to provide adequate transition services, resulting in

awards of compensatory education and attorney fees that further strain special education budgets. Participants' experiences of being nominally linked to agencies but functionally on their own illustrate the human cost behind these policy failures. Together, the evidence confirms concerns about systemic fragmentation, extends the literature by illuminating how this fragmentation intersects with social-emotional burdens and intersectional vulnerabilities for students with BIF, and challenges the field to move beyond formal compliance toward coordinated, relational, and emotionally attuned pathways into adult services.

Taken together, these interpretations highlight that the challenges described by participants were not simply individual shortcomings or isolated programmatic flaws, but reflections of deeper structural and equity issues. Across findings, students with BIF encountered inconsistent access to meaningful decision-making, uneven opportunities to translate interests into pathways, chronic neglect of life-skills instruction, and fragmented support systems that were hardest to navigate for those already experiencing anxiety, low confidence, or marginalization. These patterns suggest that the transition experiences of students with BIF are shaped as much by systemic design and policy constraints as by individual characteristics or effort. Thus, the implications of this study extend beyond improving discrete transition practices to interrogating how schools, districts, and broader systems construct and constrain possibilities for this group of learners. It is within this broader lens that the following section considers the implications of these findings for social justice.

Implications for Social Justice

This research reveals critical gaps between the rhetoric of inclusive education and the lived experiences of students with BIF navigating the transition to adulthood. Equity in special education requires far more than placing students in general education settings; it demands

meaningful agency, intentional resource linkage, and recognition of the intersecting barriers students face (Booth, 2005; Booth et al., 2006). While inclusion philosophy seeks to maximize student participation in general education and minimize exclusionary practices, the experiences of participants in this study suggest that inclusion without autonomy, choice, and genuine student voice reproduces rather than disrupts existing inequities (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). When students are placed in general education courses but denied meaningful participation in transition planning, when their voices are heard but not acted upon, inclusion becomes a form of symbolic integration rather than liberation. The research participants who developed self-advocacy and communication skills, who felt heard and competent in their planning processes, were more likely to shift from passive compliance to active agency in decisions about their futures. Conversely, those whose participation remained passive or tokenistic found their carefully constructed plans disconnected from their actual postschool choices. This distinction matters profoundly for social justice: true inclusion requires centering student voice, building confidence through meaningful participation, and ensuring that transition planning reflects not institutional requirements, but students' and families' authentic aspirations.

The disconnect between relationships and pathways that emerged in this research represents a systemic failure to leverage the very spaces where students with BIF experience belonging and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Participants consistently identified supportive relationships with teachers, staff, and peers, as well as interest-based electives, as sites where they felt seen, capable, and motivated. Yet schools rarely intentionally connected these strengths to clear career or postsecondary pathways, leaving students caught between the emotional support they received and the formal trajectories prescribed for them (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019). This gap reflects deeper structural constraints. Educational leaders in central

positions have been criticized for being impractical about the challenges schools face in creating truly individualized plans (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Schools often lack sufficient choices or flexibility to align student interests with viable postschool options (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019). From a social justice perspective, this represents a failure to honor the humanity and potential of students with BIF. When schools recognize students' strengths in relational and interest-based spaces but fail to translate those strengths into concrete opportunities, they inadvertently communicate that students' interests and competencies matter only within the bounded, low-stakes environment of electives, not in the "real" world of careers and independence. Equitable transition planning must intentionally bridge these spaces, ensuring that the relationships and interests that build confidence become the foundation for postschool pathways.

The persistent inequities in access to hands-on, career-linked, and vocational experiences further illuminate how systemic constraints disproportionately affect students with BIF (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). While research demonstrates the power of career and technical education in building real skills, realistic expectations, and sometimes credentials, access to such experiences remained uneven and constrained, particularly for students with BIF. This uneven access intersects with broader patterns of marginalization rooted in socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and race (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Students from low-income households are disproportionately represented in special education and face significant barriers to accessing high-quality instructional materials and individualized support. English learners with cognitive disabilities are often under-identified or misidentified, making access to targeted services and transition planning more challenging (Grindal et al., 2019; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Additionally, Black and Latinx students are overrepresented in special

education programs under subjective disability categories while simultaneously being underserved in areas that promote autonomy, student voice, and postsecondary readiness (Cook-Sather, 2020). These overlapping factors create a complex web of disadvantage that narrows options and reinforces externally steered paths rather than student-directed futures. Addressing this inequity requires schools to prioritize equitable access to career and technical education, to recognize that vocational pathways are not inferior to academic tracks, and to ensure that students with BIF; particularly those from marginalized communities, have the same opportunities for meaningful, credential-bearing experiences as their non-disabled peers.

Finally, the chronic gaps in life-skills instruction and the fragmentation of external supports represent systemic failures that disproportionately harm students already navigating intersecting barriers (Peltopuro et al., 2014; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). Participants entered adulthood without explicit instruction in managing money, completing forms, navigating transportation, accessing benefits, or performing independent living tasks; gaps that persisted even when students felt academically or socially supported. Simultaneously, transition plans often mentioned agencies or services only briefly, with actual linkages to community resources, disability services, and postschool programs remaining weak, inconsistent, or poorly explained. Students were rarely positioned as informed navigators of these systems, and even when opportunities technically existed, low confidence, anxiety, depression, and overwhelm made it difficult to seek help, follow through, or advocate (Brady et al., 2021; West, 2009). This fragmentation is not neutral; it disproportionately affects students whose families lack social capital, cultural knowledge, or resources to fill gaps left by schools. From a social justice perspective, schools have an obligation to explicitly teach life skills, intentionally connect students to external supports and services, and position students as agents capable of navigating

adult systems rather than as passive recipients of poorly coordinated services. Creating realistic transition plans that reflect student and family perspectives and goals requires schools to move beyond minimal compliance with legal mandates and graduation requirements toward a sustained commitment to culturally responsive, linguistically appropriate transition planning that is aligned with the diverse strengths and needs of this population (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Only then can inclusion become truly equitable; a lived experience of belonging, agency, and preparation, rather than a policy that masks ongoing marginalization.

Implications and Recommendations for Leadership

The barriers students with BIF encounter operate at three interconnected levels: (1) transition planning practices within schools, (2) district and state policies that shape graduation requirements and resource allocation, and (3) broader societal and postsecondary systems that define educational value and opportunity. Strengthening outcomes for students with BIF will require attention to all three levels. The recommendations that follow are organized by barrier type, clarifying what can be addressed through improved ITP practices, what requires policy reform, and what demands systemic change across education and adult service systems.

In the context of this section, "leaders" refers both to district-level special education administrators, who shape policies, allocate resources, and set priorities that affect secondary transition programming across the system, and to site-level administrators, who interpret those policies and make day-to-day decisions for the students they serve. District leaders have the authority to establish expectations for transition planning, curriculum, and interagency collaboration, while principals and other site administrators influence how these expectations are enacted, which courses and programs are offered, and how much flexibility teams can utilize to respond to individual students' needs. The recommendations that follow are therefore directed at

both levels of leadership, recognizing that meaningful change for students with BIF requires alignment between district policy and school-level practice.

Educational leaders have an important opportunity to reimagine how systems serve students with BIF. The findings from this study suggest that special education leadership often operates through a compliance-focused lens, where state and district representatives establish mandates and benchmarks, and schools work to implement them. Within the context of this study, this approach can sometimes obscure the nuanced, individual needs of students with BIF. When leaders have limited time in classrooms and minimal direct contact with the students their decisions affect, it becomes more difficult to fully understand what responsive transition planning requires. By shifting toward systems that balance accountability with individualization, school leaders can better support equitable outcomes for this population.

Redefine Accountability and Center Student Voice as Core Leadership Outcomes

Current accountability systems often rely on compliance metrics and graduation rates as primary measures of success. For students with BIF, these measures do not fully capture meaningful educational outcomes such as meaningful employment, postsecondary participation, community agency connection, and independent living (Cimera et al., 2018; Whittenburg et al., 2019). Additionally, self-determination is frequently treated as an add-on or a section of the IEP form to be completed, rather than as a core leadership outcome. Research demonstrates that when students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, they are more likely to engage, persist, and achieve meaningful outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In this study, participants described experiences where their voices were present but not truly heard in decision-making, suggesting that current transition processes may not be sufficiently youth-led or student-centered. This reflects a transition planning practice issue; many ITP teams could be

more intentional about structuring meetings to elevate student voice and ensure genuine choice-making, regardless of current accountability systems.

Leaders have an opportunity to shift evaluation practices to include student-centered, lived outcomes data. Rather than measuring success solely through compliance metrics such as whether transition plans were written on time or whether agencies were listed, leaders could incorporate student follow-up data and alumni voice to evaluate the effectiveness of career and technical education, life skills curricula, and transition practices (Brady et al., 2021). Elevating self-determination as a core leadership outcome requires redesigning transition processes to be more youth-led and student-centered, which could include explicit instruction in self-advocacy and decision-making practice woven throughout IEP and ITP meetings, not just during transition planning time (Furney & Salembier, 2020). However, district-level policies that define what counts as "success" and how transition programs are evaluated also shape whether self-determination becomes a real priority or remains peripheral; this is a policy-level change that requires leaders to intentionally reframe district accountability measures. Leaders can support this work by asking in transition meetings: How are we supporting this student's autonomy, competence, and relatedness? Are students genuinely choosing among options, or are predetermined paths being presented? Are students' voices meaningfully shaping the plan? Making this shift requires investment in staff capacity, with teachers and administrators benefiting from professional development on self-determination theory, trauma-informed practice, and understanding disability as shaped by social and systemic factors, not merely as individual deficits. Beyond school-level practice and policy, broader societal systems, including employer expectations, postsecondary admissions criteria, and cultural narratives about disability; often position students with disabilities as passive recipients of services rather than as

agents in their own lives, making it challenging for schools to truly center student voice in a system that does not broadly value it. Leaders who create conditions where students with BIF feel genuinely heard and where their interests and aspirations shape their educational pathway can help support the development of confidence and self-advocacy skills (Brady et al., 2021; Furney & Salembier, 2000; Cook-Sather, 2020). When a student thrives in a particular class or activity, that information can reveal strengths, interests, and possible postschool pathways that can inform transition planning (Brady et al., 2021; Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Design Systems Around Life Skills and Career-Linked Learning Grounded in Real-World Practice

Within the context of this study, participants often entered adulthood without basic practical skills not because they lacked capacity, but because explicit instruction in core adult competencies was not provided. Many students also face barriers to accessing career and technical education and hands-on work experiences due to scheduling policies, prerequisite requirements, and transportation logistics. Additionally, life skills instruction and career-linked opportunities are frequently treated as separate from academic coursework, and when provided, often remain limited to simulations or classroom-based activities rather than authentic, real-world practice. Some of this reflects transition planning practice limitations; ITP teams could be more proactive in advocating for real-world learning experiences and in connecting life skills instruction to authentic adult tasks, even within current constraints. These gaps suggest that current systems may not be adequately preparing students with BIF for the practical demands of adult life.

Leaders should establish a guaranteed life-skills curriculum sequence with explicit, scaffolded instruction in core adult competencies such as money management, navigating forms

and systems, transportation, accessing benefits, housing basics, and time management. These should be embedded as accessible course options for all students, not only those with IEPs or BIF, in order to better meet the diverse needs, goals, and contexts of students and their families (Cook-Sather, 2020; Frielink et al., 2018). Equally important is ensuring that life-skills instruction and career-linked opportunities extend beyond talk and simulation to sustained, real-world practice, with courses requiring students to complete actual applications for jobs or services, navigate real bus routes, make phone calls to agencies, and rehearse the everyday tasks they will need to perform (Brady et al., 2021). However, scheduling policies, prerequisite structures, and budget decisions about transportation are district and state policy matters that directly constrain what is possible; leaders need to examine and reform these policies to create genuine access to CTE and work-based learning. Leaders have an opportunity to examine scheduling policies, prerequisite requirements, and transportation logistics to identify and remove barriers to CTE, dual enrollment, and internship programs (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). Co-leading with community partners strengthens these efforts; rather than relying on one-off partnerships, leaders could create standing agreements that make hands-on experiences routine and reliable (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). Beyond school and district control, broader societal systems; including labor market conditions, employer willingness to hire students with disabilities, and the cultural positioning of "life skills" as remedial rather than essential all shape whether real-world learning experiences are truly available and valued. Leaders can also treat interest-based electives as meaningful data for transition planning, revealing strengths and possible pathways that can inform CTE pathway selection and work-based learning opportunities.

Build Coherent, Relational Systems with External Agencies

One important finding from this research is the fragmentation of support at the critical transition from high school to adulthood. Within the context of this study, transition plans often mentioned agencies such as vocational rehabilitation, regional centers, and disability services without concrete mechanisms for actual connection. This reflects both a transition planning practice gap; ITP teams could initiate earlier conversations with external agencies and document concrete warm handoffs rather than simply listing agency names, and a structural coordination problem that extends beyond individual team efforts. This pattern suggests that current systems may not be adequately preparing students for the transition to adult services and supports, leaving students and families to navigate these systems independently at a critical juncture.

Recommendations for Leaders: Leaders have an opportunity to move from a model of simply "listing" agencies to a model of actively "linking" students with services. Any agency included in an ITP could be accompanied by a concrete step: a warm handoff, a joint meeting, or co-facilitated IEP meetings with the agency representative before the student exits high school (Brady et al., 2021). Creating coherent systems could involve leaders co-designing shared protocols with external agencies rather than leaving connections to chance. However, meaningful interagency coordination requires policy-level changes, such as memoranda of understanding, shared data systems, and aligned timelines that clarify expectations and create accountability for joint work across school and adult service systems. Leaders might work with vocational rehabilitation, regional centers, and community programs to establish shared timelines, clear roles, and defined access points so students and families understand what to expect. Leaders can then track how many students with BIF actually connect with at least one adult-facing support within six to twelve months of exit. Beyond school and district efforts, the fragmentation of adult

service systems themselves, driven by different federal funding streams, mandates, and accountability measures across vocational rehabilitation, regional centers, and disability services, creates structural barriers to coordination that no single school or district can fully resolve without broader systemic alignment. This data becomes a useful measure of transition effectiveness and helps identify where system-level improvements might be beneficial (Harvey et al., 2019; Whittenburg et al., 2019).

Lead with Proximity, Humility, and Flexibility

Many systems operate through standardized pathways and uniform requirements that may not adequately reflect the diversity of students' needs, strengths, and aspirations. When leaders have limited direct engagement with classrooms, transition meetings, and the lived experiences of students and families, it becomes more difficult to understand both the constraints and the possibilities within their systems. This distance can result in policies and practices that, while well-intentioned, may not fully support individualized, responsive approaches to transition planning.

Leaders benefit from spending meaningful time in classrooms, in transition meetings, and in understanding the real experiences of students and families. This direct engagement helps leaders understand both the constraints and the possibilities within their systems and enables them to listen to teachers about what is feasible, to families about what their children need, and to students themselves about their aspirations and goals (Brady et al., 2021; Cook-Sather, 2020). Proximity also helps leaders distinguish between constraints that stem from practice habits, which can be shifted through professional development and leadership; and those embedded in district policy or broader systems. Additionally, leaders have an opportunity to create space for flexibility and innovation within existing systems. True individualization, as required by law and

supported by research, benefits from responsive, adaptive approaches rather than uniform requirements and standardized pathways (IDEA, 2004; Brady et al., 2021). However, the flexibility leaders can exercise is often constrained by state graduation requirements, funding structures, and accountability measures; meaning that some barriers to individualization require policy change, not just leadership willingness. Leaders who recognize that equity requires differentiation and flexibility can better support students with diverse needs and aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Implications and Recommendations for Policy

The systemic barriers that students with BIF face are not incidental; they are closely tied to the policies and structures that govern special education and secondary transition. While individual leaders can create meaningful change within their schools, more sustainable and equitable outcomes for students with BIF will likely require policy-level attention to fragmentation, inequity, and under-preparation.

Clarify Expectations for Independent Living and Life-Skills Instruction

An important implication of this study is that current federal and state policy allows considerable variability in how transition planning is implemented and which outcomes are emphasized. One example is the IDEA provision that independent living goals are required only when teams deem them "necessary" for diploma-bound students (IDEA, 2004). In practice, within the context of this study, this can mean that students with BIF who earn diplomas exit high school without explicit instruction in money management, accessing services, navigating transportation, or other essential adult tasks. This policy ambiguity creates a transition planning practice issue, some ITP teams do not consistently raise independent living as a discussion point, even when students would benefit, because policy does not require it. However, the underlying

barrier is the federal policy itself, which frames independent living skills as optional rather than a default expectation for all students with IEPs. More broadly, secondary education systems have historically not prioritized life-skills curricula for any student population, reflecting a cultural and systemic bias that positions "life skills" as remedial rather than essential to educational preparation.

In response to this implication, one recommendation is that policy more clearly establish independent living skills as a default expectation within transition planning for students with IEPs, including those with BIF, regardless of diploma pathway (Powers et al., 2005). It may also be beneficial for policy to support life-skills instruction as a guaranteed component of the secondary curriculum, credited toward graduation and including both explicit teaching and real-world practice, rather than an optional elective or an informal conversation with a case manager (Cavendish et al., 2019).

Support Flexible and Nuanced Graduation Pathways

A second implication is that current diploma and certificate frameworks often position students in a binary track, which may not reflect the complexity of many students' profiles (Cole et al., 2022; Peltopuro et al., 2014). Students with BIF, for example, may require some curriculum modifications to succeed academically while also possessing the adaptive competencies needed for employment or further education. Within the context of this study, participants often faced pressure to choose between academically rigorous courses and elective options that could increase their exposure to career opportunities. While better transition planning conversations could help teams navigate this tension more skillfully, the fundamental constraint is the binary diploma/certificate structure itself; a policy-level barrier that does not permit concurrent pathways. Additionally, the current system creates a false choice: students

who earn a diploma lose access to specialized transition supports and adult transition programs, while students pursuing a certificate of completion may have greater access to services but face lower academic expectations. This binary structure does not account for students with BIF who could successfully complete diploma requirements while also benefiting from targeted transition services and support. Underlying this policy structure is a broader societal reality: employers and postsecondary institutions use diploma status as a gatekeeper for opportunity, and adult service systems are funded and designed as alternatives to traditional pathways rather than as complementary supports, creating systemic pressure to maintain a clear binary distinction.

Given this implication, one recommendation is that policy encourage more flexible graduation pathways, such as allowing students to pursue diploma requirements while simultaneously maintaining access to adult transition programs and specialized transition supports (Brady et al., 2021). Within the context of this study, participants described how access to both rigorous academics and targeted transition preparation would have strengthened their readiness for adulthood. Permitting teams the flexibility to design pathways where students can earn a diploma while also participating in life-skills instruction, work-based learning, and agency linkage—rather than requiring an either/or choice—would honor the diversity of students' needs and strengths (Thurlow et al., 2002; Cole et al., 2022). Research shows that when students with disabilities receive appropriate transition planning and targeted interventions, they are more likely to graduate and pursue postsecondary education or employment (Cole et al., 2022), suggesting that combining diploma pathways with robust transition services could yield stronger outcomes.

A related recommendation is that policymakers make more intentional use of existing flexibility in graduation requirements. In California, for example, minimum state graduation

requirements are already used for particular student populations, including foster youth, students experiencing homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act, and students enrolled in adult high schools or vocationally focused high schools. Extending similar flexibility to students with BIF could create space in their schedules for additional vocational courses, CTE pathways, and work placements during high school, without requiring them to forgo a diploma (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). Research indicates that students who complete a rigorous academic core alongside a career concentration achieve outcomes equal to or exceeding those of traditional college prep students and are more likely to pursue postsecondary education and maintain higher engagement (California Department of Education, n.d.; Harvey et al., 2019). Such an approach could reduce the pressure to choose between diploma status and meaningful transition preparation and might help districts design options that honor both academic rigor and the intensive support many students with BIF need to navigate the transition to adulthood (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Brady et al., 2021).

Promote Equitable Access to Career and Technical Education

A third implication is that policy significantly shapes whether students with disabilities, including those with BIF, have meaningful access to career and technical education (CTE) and work-based learning. Barriers such as prerequisites, restrictive scheduling, and limited transportation can prevent students from enrolling in coherent, career-aligned course sequences, even when CTE opportunities exist (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018; Brady et al., 2021). Research shows that high-risk students are eight to ten times less likely to drop out in 11th and 12th grades if they enroll in a CTE program (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018), underscoring the significance of access as an equity issue. Some of these barriers stem from transition planning practice. ITP teams could advocate more proactively for schedule

modifications, prerequisite waivers, and transportation solutions for individual students. However, the primary and most systemic barriers are district and state policy decisions about how CTE programs are structured, funded, and prioritized; decisions that determine whether prerequisites can be waived, whether transportation is available, and whether scheduling flexibility exists in the first place. More broadly, CTE has historically been positioned as a "lesser" pathway compared to college-prep academics; a cultural and systemic bias that persists despite research showing strong outcomes, and work-based learning opportunities remain unevenly distributed across schools and communities, reflecting broader inequities in how educational opportunity is structured and valued.

In response to this implication, one recommendation is that policy remove or significantly reduce barriers to CTE and work-based learning for students with disabilities. This could include eliminating prerequisite requirements for students with IEPs who wish to enroll in CTE sequences, establishing guaranteed transportation access for work-based learning experiences, and creating flexible scheduling options that allow students to pursue both academic and career-focused coursework (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019). Additionally, policymakers could strengthen funding and accountability measures that ensure CTE and dual enrollment opportunities are available and promoted equitably across all schools, not concentrated in well-resourced districts (Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). Policy could also support explicit partnerships between schools and employers or community colleges to create predictable, scaled work-based learning opportunities rather than relying on individual teacher initiative or sporadic partnerships.

Strengthen Interagency Coordination and Funding for Transition

A final implication concerns the role of policy in either facilitating or hindering coordination between schools and external agencies such as vocational rehabilitation, regional centers, community colleges, and disability services. Co-designed transition protocols with clear timelines, shared responsibilities, and "warm handoffs" have the potential to reduce the risk that students lose support at the point of exit (Brady et al., 2021). Some of this coordination challenge reflects transition planning practice gaps; ITP teams could initiate earlier conversations with external agencies and document concrete warm handoffs rather than simply listing agency names in transition plans. The experience of the research site illustrates both the promise and fragility of transition-focused programming. For more than a decade, the district operated a Workability program funded through a grant that provided targeted job exploration and community-based transition experiences for students with IEPs who were ready to build employment skills. The recent dismantling of this program, and the shift toward a Future Center designed to serve all students but staffed by personnel without specialized expertise in working with students with IEPs or BIF, represents a significant policy and resource reconfiguration. This illustrates a district/state policy barrier; the reliance on time-limited grant funding rather than stable, dedicated budget allocations for transition services means that access depends on funding cycles and leadership priorities rather than guaranteed commitment. The impacts of this decision have not yet been systematically studied, but it underscores how heavily students' opportunities can depend on grant-funded initiatives and local priorities. Stable funding is therefore a central policy concern. Transition services, life-skills instruction, CTE, and work-based learning are often supported through fragmented or time-limited funding streams, which can result in inconsistent access and sudden loss of services when grants end or leadership priorities shift

(Cimera et al., 2018). Beyond school and district control, the broader systemic issue is that adult service systems; vocational rehabilitation, regional centers, community colleges, and disability services operate under different federal funding streams, mandates, and accountability measures with minimal coordination, creating structural barriers that no single school or district can resolve without federal and state policy alignment.

Strengthening interagency coordination also requires more intentional design of how schools connect students and families to adult service systems throughout high school. Regional Centers, community college disability services, and vocational rehabilitation programs each operate with their own eligibility criteria and documentation requirements, which can be especially challenging for students with BIF whose needs are significant but not always formally recognized as a qualifying disability category (Brady et al., 2021; Cimera et al., 2018). When eligibility hinges on documented intellectual disability or clearly defined clinical diagnoses, students with BIF are at risk of being excluded from Regional Center services or receiving minimal support at community colleges, even when they would benefit from case management, academic accommodations, or supported employment. Intentional practices such as inviting adult agency representatives to IEP and ITP meetings, jointly developing step-by-step referral timelines, and teaching students and families how to navigate intake and documentation processes can increase the likelihood that students with BIF leave high school with active connections to community colleges, disability resource centers, Regional Centers, and vocational rehabilitation rather than needing to initiate those connections on their own after exit (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019).

In response to these implications, a central recommendation is that funding mechanisms incentivize collaboration, for example through joint initiatives or shared performance indicators

related to student engagement in services, in order to strengthen partnerships between schools and external agencies (Cimera et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2019). Establishing more predictable, dedicated funding for transition services, life-skills instruction, CTE, and work-based learning would help ensure that access does not depend on grant cycles, district wealth, or leadership turnover (Cimera et al., 2018). In this context, it is also important that policies clarify that including students with BIF in general education settings should not inadvertently reduce their access to specialized transition supports; equity is more likely when inclusive placement and targeted services are treated as complementary, not mutually exclusive (Brady et al., 2021; Francisco et al., 2020).

Implications for IEP Case Managers (Education Specialists)

At the level of day-to-day practice, IEP case managers (education specialists) have considerable power to improve transition support for students with BIF even without new laws or formal policy changes. They can design and routinely use transition surveys and planning tools that explicitly probe autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008); for example, asking students what choices they want more control over, where they feel most confident, and which adults they trust. Beginning these conversations early in high school, and revisiting them regularly, helps normalize self-advocacy and positions students as authors of their own plans rather than passive recipients (Furney & Salembier, 2000; Cook-Sather, 2020). Case managers can also curate and maintain living resource lists of local employers that are open to working with youth, community college disability offices, regional center staff, Department of Rehabilitation counselors, and transportation training programs, and share these with students and families in concrete, accessible ways. Taking the extra step to identify specific named contacts at regional centers or offices of rehabilitation and arranging warm handoffs (joint

meetings, three-way calls, email introductions) can transform a vague recommendation into a supported connection that students are more likely to sustain (Brady et al., 2021). Even small practices such as inviting agency representatives to IEP/ITP meetings, role-playing phone calls with students, or co-filling an application during a session, can significantly reduce the emotional and logistical barriers participants in this study described.

At the same time, the findings from this study point to implications for what case managers could do more fully and systematically if they were backed by clear guidance and flexibility from site and district leadership. With administrative support, education specialists could collaborate in shaping alternative course pathways that intentionally reduce some core credit requirements for certain students in order to make room for robust vocational, CTE, and life-skills coursework; aligning the course of study with documented strengths, needs, and postschool goals rather than a one-size-fits-all template (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019). Schools could institutionalize life-skills courses or sequences for all students, not only those in special education, ensuring that instruction in money management, forms, transportation, and system navigation is built into the regular program (Powers et al., 2005). District-level agreements and transportation solutions could allow students with BIF to attend other campuses or regional programs to access specialized vocational options their home school cannot offer (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). Crucially, administrators can affirm that case managers are empowered to recommend and document these kinds of individualized pathways in the ITP; treating education specialists as instructional and transition experts rather than as compliance officers checking boxes on a district-generated list (Brady et al., 2021). When case managers' professional judgment is supported in this way, they are better positioned to design

transition plans that are not only legally sufficient, but genuinely responsive to the lives and futures of the students they serve (Furney & Salembier, 2000; Cook-Sather, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

This study carried several limitations that influenced its scope and interpretation. The most significant limitation was the study's focus on a narrowly defined population of seven former high school students with BIF from a single Southern California high school. While this specificity was intentional and necessary to answer the research questions, it inherently limited the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The homogeneity of the sample, combined with the single-site focus, restricted how widely the findings could be applied. This study was designed not to generalize to all students, but rather to provide depth and insight into a group whose experiences are often underrepresented in transition planning research (Maxwell, 2013).

Another key limitation stemmed from the use of IQ scores as a criterion for participant selection. In California, the legal precedent set by *Larry P. v. Riles* (1979) prohibits the use of IQ testing with Black students in public school settings due to the historically biased and discriminatory application of such assessments (MacMillan & Forness, 1998). This meant that Black students who may have met the criteria for BIF could not ethically or legally be included in the study if their IQ scores were not documented. As a result, the study lacked full demographic representation, particularly of Black students, and therefore presented an incomplete picture of the broader BIF population (Floyd & Kranzler, 2020). This limitation raised important concerns about equity in research and the ongoing impact of policies intended to protect students from harm but that may have inadvertently excluded their voices from the academic record.

Methodologically, the research also presented challenges related to the nature of the data being collected. Because the study relied in part on retrospective interviews, participants' recollections were influenced by recall bias. Memories of high school experiences may have been incomplete, distorted, or reshaped by time and subsequent life events (Mertler, 2019). While archival documents such as transcripts, Individualized Education Program (IEPs), and Individualized Transition Plans (ITPs) were successfully collected and analyzed, the reliance on participant memory as a primary data source meant that the study's findings were filtered through participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of their high school and post-school transitions.

These limitations underscore the importance of situating this study's findings within the specific context in which the research was conducted. While the depth of qualitative inquiry offered valuable insight into the experiences of the seven students with BIF who participated, those insights are best understood as situated, contextual knowledge applicable primarily to similar educational environments and student populations rather than broadly generalizable across diverse settings. At the same time, it is important to recognize that students with BIF represent less than 15 percent of students with disabilities. In this light, seven participants, although a small sample in absolute terms, constitute a comparatively meaningful proportion within the context of a typical high school, where students with BIF are relatively few in number.

The practices highlighted by participants also align with principles of self-determination and universal design that the broader literature associates with positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Supports such as fostering self-determination, ensuring meaningful participation in planning, and expanding access to a variety of career, college, and technical opportunities have been linked to improved academic and postschool outcomes in other studies

(Deci & Ryan, 2008; Harvey et al., 2019; Brady et al., 2021). Although this study was not designed to make claims about all students or all settings, its findings suggest potential directions for practice and inquiry that could be examined in larger and more diverse samples. By focusing on a population that has historically been overlooked, this research begins to illuminate patterns and gaps in transition planning that may inform more equitable approaches for students with BIF and may hold relevance, to be tested empirically, for other groups of students with disabilities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research emerging from this study center on how secondary systems might be restructured to offer young people with BIF more flexible, coherent, and autonomy-supportive pathways through and beyond high school. First, there is a need for empirical work on alternative graduation pathways in comprehensive high schools that go beyond the binary of "standard diploma or less." Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies could examine models that integrate credit-bearing CTE pathways, extended timelines, competency-based credits, or blended academic–vocational diplomas, and track how these options affect postschool employment, postsecondary enrollment, and quality of life for students with BIF (Cimera et al., 2018; Whittenburg et al., 2019; Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019). Closely related, future research should investigate how greater flexibility within IEP teams around course selection and graduation requirements, for example, substituting or modifying certain requirements in favor of robust CTE, work-based learning, or life-skills coursework could shape students' sense of self-determination, engagement, and adult outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Brady et al., 2021). This work should include classroom- and meeting-level observations to capture how decisions are actually made, whose voices carry weight, and how equity and risk are being negotiated in real time (Cook-Sather, 2020; Furney & Salembier, 2000).

Second, given that many comprehensive high schools cannot independently offer the full range of programs that would further the career or transition goals of students with BIF, there is a pressing need for research on inter-school and inter-program mobility. Studies could examine the academic, social, and logistical implications of allowing students with BIF, or all students with the need, to be bussed to specialized CTE centers, community college dual-enrollment programs, or other district/regional hubs (Harvey et al., 2019; Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018). Such research should attend not only to outcomes (credits earned, credentials attained, employment) but also to issues of belonging, stigma, and family burden (e.g., longer commute times, coordination challenges) (Shaw, 2008; Wieland & Zitman, 2016).

Comparative case studies across districts with different transportation and partnership models would be particularly valuable for shining a light on what supports are necessary for these arrangements to be equitable rather than segregating (Brady et al., 2021).

Finally, future work should more deeply interrogate inclusion models for students with BIF, with special attention to both benefits and pitfalls when students are removed from, or fully integrated out of, all separate settings (Francisco et al., 2020; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). On one hand, studies could document the conditions under which inclusive classrooms and schools genuinely support autonomy, competence, and relatedness for students with BIF (Deci & Ryan, 2008); for example, co-teaching, differentiated instruction, peer supports, and embedded life-skills and transition content (Brady et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2019). On the other hand, there is a need for critical research on potential unintended consequences of eliminating separate supports altogether: increased academic pressure without corresponding scaffolds, heightened anxiety, subtle social exclusion, or the disappearance of specialized transition expertise (Francisco et al., 2020; Mazzotti, et al. 2021). Comparative designs that follow students across

different placement patterns (e.g., predominantly inclusive settings, mixed models, and more specialized programs) and track both academic and transition indicators would help move the field beyond ideological debates about inclusion toward a more nuanced understanding of which configurations, under what conditions, and for whom best promote self-determination and successful adult lives for young people with BIF (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Cole et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study examined how young adults with BIF experienced secondary transition supports and how those supports shaped their early postschool trajectories. The findings presented in Chapter 4 reveal that transition supports were often partial, inconsistently developed, and insufficiently aligned with students' stated needs, goals, and everyday realities. The patterns identified suggest less an absence of care or effort on the part of educators and more structural and policy conditions that made it difficult to provide coherent, sustained, and student-centered transition programming.

Viewed through the primary research question and its subquestions, the findings offer a cohesive response. With respect to how young adults with BIF described the transition support they received (Research Question 1), participants portrayed their IEP and ITP processes less as isolated meetings or documents and more as ongoing experiences that either fostered or constrained their confidence, voice, and sense of belonging. In relation to Subquestion A, their accounts indicated that self-determination, when supported through meaningful participation and clear information, enhanced motivation and capacity to navigate life after high school, whereas tokenistic involvement and low expectations contributed to quiet compliance and uncertainty. Subquestion B asked how specific transition activities prepared them for adulthood; participants pointed to relationships, interest-based electives, CTE, and work-based learning as the most

impactful activities, while noting that these opportunities were often limited, inconsistently linked to coherent plans, or crowded out by required coursework. Finally, addressing Subquestion C, students described significant barriers and gaps in transition planning, including limited life-skills instruction, insufficient attention to independent living goals, and fragmented or confusing connections to external agencies. Together, their responses underscore that the quality of transition support for students with BIF was measured not only by the presence of formal activities, but by the extent to which those activities promoted autonomy, competence, and relatedness in ways that carried into early adulthood.

The experiences of participants in this study also illuminate a fundamental distinction between equality and equity in special education and transition planning. Equality, understood as the provision of identical requirements and pathways for all students, can appear fair on the surface, yet it often positions students with BIF within diploma tracks and academic expectations designed for peers with different cognitive profiles, supports, and postschool opportunities. In this study, such sameness frequently translated into an overemphasis on standard academic requirements and an underinvestment in the forms of preparation that participants identified as most impactful: hands-on learning, life skills, and coordinated agency support. Equity, by contrast, requires acknowledging that students have different needs, strengths, and goals, and designing individualized pathways that support genuine independence, dignity, and long-term success rather than simple compliance with uniform benchmarks.

Seen through this lens, participants' accounts challenge systems that treat flexibility in course of study, graduation requirements, and placement as exceptions to be justified rather than central tools for achieving just outcomes. When students with BIF are held to identical requirements without commensurate scaffolds, or when independent living goals and vocational

experiences are treated as optional add-ons, schools may inadvertently create new barriers instead of removing existing ones. Conversely, when educators and leaders work to align programs with students' interests, provide access to robust CTE and work-based learning, embed life-skills instruction, and build coherent bridges to adult services, they move from a model of equality to one of equity, in which pathways are intentionally varied so that outcomes can be more just.

Ultimately, the findings from this study point to the need to reframe transition support for young people with BIF as a matter not only of technical compliance, but also of ethical and political responsibility. Supporting these students effectively requires more than completing transition paperwork or offering a standard menu of classes; it entails redesigning systems so that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are actively cultivated, and so that students are not left to navigate a fragmented landscape of agencies and expectations on their own. By centering students' voices, honoring their strengths and vulnerabilities, and reshaping structures to better reflect their lived contexts, educational leaders can move closer to a vision of transition that is not only procedurally adequate, but fundamentally just.

Revisiting the concerns introduced in Chapter 1, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to move students with BIF from the margins of policy and practice to the center of transition planning. Future research and reform efforts that build on these findings, particularly those co-designed with students and families, hold promise for creating systems in which young people with BIF can navigate adulthood with greater agency, opportunity, and support.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Subject Line: Opportunity to Participate in Research Study: Navigating the Transition from High School to Adulthood

Body of Email:

Dear Student,

You are receiving this email because you graduated from Stars Hollow High School at least 2 years ago with an IEP. I am a doctoral student at the University of California, San Diego and California State University San Marcos and the research for my dissertation is focused on exploring the experiences of young adults who had an IEP and the support they received in transition planning. The title of my research is: Navigating the Transition from High School to Adulthood: Insights from Graduates with Borderline Intellectual Functioning Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory.

I would greatly appreciate it if you could participate in my research study to learn your experiences transitioning to adulthood and share your recommendations for potential areas of improvement. If you are interested in participating in this research study, reply to this email and provide your phone number. Then, within three to five business days, I will contact you for a short discussion and to schedule your interview.

Why you should participate:

- Participants can help the researcher learn about the impact and outcomes of transition planning in our district
- Participants' insights and recommendations can help teachers and administrators improve system-wide practices in the ITP process.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at tseaver@ucsd.edu

Kind regards,
Tabitha

Tabitha Seaver (she, her, hers)
EdD Candidate in Educational Leadership
University of California, San Diego
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APPENDIX B: FOLLOW-UP EMAIL

Subject Line: Confirmation of Participation in Research Study: Navigating the Transition from High School to Adulthood: Insights from Graduates with Borderline Intellectual Functioning Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory.

Attachments: Pre-Interview Questions

Body of Email:

Hi (insert student's name),

Thank you for scheduling a (in person/virtual interview) to participate in my research study: Navigating the Transition from High School to Adulthood: Insights from Graduates with Borderline Intellectual Functioning Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory. I would like to talk with you on the phone to review some basic current information about your life. I have attached those questions for your review ahead of time. Please let me know when you are available to talk on the phone for a short (5-10 minute) conversation.

Your virtual interview will take place on (state date and time)

Here is the Zoom link or address of meeting place: (insert zoom link)

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at tseaver@ucsd.edu

Kind regards,
Tabitha

Tabitha Seaver (she, her, hers)
EdD Candidate in Educational Leadership
University of California, San Diego
California State University San Marcos
tseaver@ucsd.edu

APPENDIX C: INITIAL PHONE CONVERSATION

The purpose of the phone meeting, is to establish some rapport with the student and learning basic life updates for data collection

These questions will be asked after the student agrees to be in the study.

In this phone conversation we will also set up a time for the full interview

Phone questions	Notes
Tell me about what you have been doing after high school? (Open ended)	
Have you had any jobs? Where, doing what?	
Did you attend or attempt college or university?	
Did you attend a trade program?	
Tell me about your living arrangements after high school? (live alone, with roommates, at home, etc)	
Do you have any longer term goals for your education or career that you are working on?	
*I would love to talk with you more about your transition experience for my study. Can we set up a time to meet? It can be in person, or on zoom, whichever you prefer?	

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions Related to SDT and Transition to Adulthood

*Before interview questions start, I will review ITP and Transcript documents with the student to help with memory and triangulation.

KEY

Autonomy-feeling like you have a choice and being willing to participate in something

Relatedness- refers to the need to feel connected to the activity and feel a sense of belongingness with others

Competence-the experience of mastery and being effective in the activity you chose to complete

Research Questions:

1. How do young adults with borderline intellectual functioning describe the transition support they received through their individualized transition plans?
 - a. In what ways did their sense of self-determination (or lack thereof) impact their motivation and ability to navigate life after high school?
 - b. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood?
 - c. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?

Question	Category	Notes/Possible answers	RQ Connections
1. Were you encouraged to take an active role in your IEP meetings and decisions? –Did you attend all or some of your meetings? –How do you think that impacts your confidence in adulthood?	Autonomy Relatedness	Along with learning if students felt included, it gives me general info about case managers thoughts about transition planning	a. In what ways did their sense of self-determination (or lack thereof) impact their motivation and ability to navigate life after high school?
2. How well did your IEP transition plan align with your goals and	Autonomy Relatedness	We can refer to their ITP/Transcript to help remind the student about the classes they took.	b. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting,

needs after leaving high school? –Looking back, can you think of things in this IEP transition plan that were most helpful in preparing you for adulthood?			vocational training) prepare them for adulthood?
3. How did your high school ITP team encourage you to make choices about your learning and future goals? –did you participate in workability, get a job, attend any workshops or field trips to programs and colleges?	Autonomy Relatedness Support	Workability, surveys, field trips	b. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood?
4. Talk to me about your experiences with core classes. Were you in a separate setting or ‘smaller class size’ or in a larger class with 2 teachers (co taught)? (this is how most of our students refer to these classes)	Competence Background	Knowing this helps differentiate which courses the student took (SAI vs General education) Their transcripts can also tell me if they received modified grading (P)	c. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?

5. Which classes did you feel the most capable in? –Why? What supports or procedures can you remember that made you feel capable in that setting or with that teacher? –Which classes did you feel least capable in? Why?	Competence	Gain student perspective on feelings and attitudes on their competence in different environments with different levels of supports	c. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?
6. Electives: Were there opportunities to pursue subjects that aligned with your personal interests or strengths? –How did this impact you later?	Relatedness Competence Academic Preparation		a. In what ways did their sense of self-determination (or lack thereof) impact their motivation and ability to navigate life after high school? b. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood?
7. Were there electives that you wished were offered that could have helped you in your transition goals?	Autonomy Relatedness		b. In what ways did their sense of self-determination (or lack thereof) impact their motivation and ability to navigate life after high school? c. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training)

			prepare them for adulthood?
8. Were there instances where you felt a sense of belonging in your high school community? (which classes, clubs, etc) -How has that influenced your relationships as an adult?	Competence Relatedness Social Development		
9. During your high school career, were there instances where you were frustrated or falling behind enough to discuss transferring to the adult school or dropping out? -Were you part of these discussions? How has that influenced your life as an adult?	Autonomy Competence Barriers	Since drop out is a topic in my paper, this question will allow me to see how close these students were to this path	c. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?
10. Were you connected to outside resources or services (e.g.,	Autonomy Relatedness Support Systems for transition	Helpful to know if the student is still receiving transition support support from DOR or SDRC	c. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?

vocational rehabilitation, community organizations) through your IEP transition plan? How useful were those connections?			
11. Is there anything else about transition support, offered courses, graduation requirements, transition support that you want to share with me that we didn't cover?			
If we have time:			
Were there courses that were offered and you would have liked to take but didn't get the opportunity to? –Why?	Barriers	In what ways did their sense of self-determination (or lack thereof) impact their motivation and ability to navigate life after high school?	b. In what ways did specific transition activities (e.g., course of study, elective options, goal-setting, vocational training) prepare them for adulthood? c. What barriers or gaps in transition planning did they experience?