A NARRATIVE INQUIRY: PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WITH AUTISM OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN IEP MEETINGS IN A CYBER CHARTER SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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***Indicates University of Admission**

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory and honor of my beloved mother, Florencia Maylee Jones Mack. I will be eternally grateful to my mother for providing me with a religious upbringing, a good education, and unconditional love.

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Abstract

Each year, millions of students with disabilities receive special education services. The development of an individual education program (IEP) is an important function in determining what services are provided. The IEP is the product of a collaborative effort between stakeholders, including the student (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). Research demonstrates that students with disabilities have negative experiences in their IEP meetings. Specifically, students have little understanding of the IEP language or their disability, and they often feel disconnected during the meeting. Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in particular face even greater challenges in terms of communication, anxiety, and other social difficulties. There is an increased need to encourage and prepare students with ASD to take an active role in their IEP meetings. (Arakelian, 2017; Doronkin et al., 2020; Hagner, et al., 2014; Kelley et al., 2011; Martin, 2017). Through a constructivist worldview, this qualitative study used a narrative inquiry approach to uncover the first-person accounts of three male high school seniors with ASD. The participants' voices were captured regarding their perceptions of their involvement in IEP meetings in a Mid-Atlantic region cyber charter school. The researcher collected data from document reviews, two semi-structured interviews, and observations of the IEP meeting. Inductive in vivo coding uncovered four themes related to the experience of the participants: (1) "It's there but it's not there;" (2) "Hey, I need help;" (3) "all about me;" and (4) "I also found out." The researcher also analyzed the data deductively, drawing connections to the self-determination theory (SDT) tenets: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The individual stories and unique identities of the participants are reflected in their use of the SDT tenets. The final chapter presents the

limitations, considerations for educators and administrators in a cyber charter school, and recommendations for future research.

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Chapter One

Secondary public education is designed to build upon student knowledge gained in elementary and middle school and introduce skills that will help prepare students to be successful in life after high school. Mason et al. (2002) discovered that for students to be adequately prepared, they need to be self-directed and exposed to experiences that foster independence. Secondary students with disabilities require the support of a multidisciplinary team comprised of individuals who understand their intellectual, academic, behavioral, physical, social, emotional, and vocational needs. The most important member of this team is the student.

Post-secondary education, employment, and independent living are critical areas for students as they approach graduating from high school. However, many of these opportunities are limited for students with disabilities. Research found that students with disabilities attend postsecondary education at much lower rates than their nondisabled peers. More specifically, in the United States, only 19.8% of individuals with disabilities ages 18 to 64 have an associate degree or higher, compared to 37.9% of individuals without disabilities in the same age range (Arakelian, 2017; Kelley et al., 2011).

Regarding employment, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) job report news release on February 24, 2022, 19.1% of individuals with disabilities are engaged in competitive integrated employment compared to 63.7% of individuals without disabilities. In terms of independent living, Kelley et al. (2011) reported that 75% of students with disabilities remained at home with parents or guardians two years after graduating from high school. Childres and Chambers (2005) added that there is a substantial gap between students with disabilities and their

nondisabled peers based on a range of adult independent experiences. Martin (2017) asserted that post high school students with disabilities have a greater chance of living in poverty, less access to transportation, and are less likely to enjoy a social life. Mason et al. (2002) reiterated that often when students with disabilities no longer have the safety and structure that schools provide, enormous challenges await. Therefore, the researchers suggested that coordinating employment efforts in high school, teaching self-determination, and participating in the IEP process are all essential activities to help prepare students for life after high school.

Furthermore, Childres and Chambers (2005) explained that "current educational planning falls short in areas of relevance, quality, and preparedness" (p. 217). In many cases, the educational planning for students with disabilities fails to build a vision based on a student's current level of performance or consideration of a student's interest and aptitude so that the case managers ensure that the goals and objectives are aligned. Childres and Chambers (2005) suggested that when educators lack focus on what the student is most interested in for their future, it often results in outcomes that do not meet the student's desires.

Like Kelley et al. (2011), Martin (2017) stated that post-school outcomes are more favorable when students participate in their IEP meetings. These improved outcomes include but are not limited to the following:

- students gaining self-determination skills and demonstrating these by increased participation in transition planning
- students engaging more in schoolwork
- transition goals aligned with students' interest and preferences

- students participating in their IEP planning and goal attainment
- graduation and employment rates increased students advocating for themselves outside of school and having access to increase adult services (p. 10)

In addition to participating in IEP meetings, Eisenman et al. (2015) emphasized that what happened in the general and special education classrooms was equally as important. Creating caring environments that individualize the needs of the students, have high expectations, and provide feedback that is timely and relevant sets students with disabilities up for successful post-school outcomes. Eisenman et al. (2015) further suggested that schools that are inclusive as well as conscious about ensuring solid structures and systems offer maximum access to resources in the home, school, and community.

Statement of Research Problem and Research Question

Wagner et al. (2012) concluded that despite the passage and amendments of IDEA requiring that students with disabilities 16 years of age and older be invited to their IEP meetings, school districts have only met the bare minimum requirements. Simply inviting a student to their IEP meeting does not mean that they will attend, nor does it mean that they will participate. Wagner et al. (2012) suggested that student attendance and participation result in the students' interests and preferences being considered. This helps shape decisions that impact their future after high school. Uphold (2008) agreed that life after high school for students with disabilities continues to present issues for special education and suggested that students with disabilities should be involved in contributing to the four stages of developing their IEP. This includes planning, drafting, implementing, and revising. Through the availability of resources and programs that help

special and general educators support a student's participation in their IEP meeting, students gain important skills, such as self-advocacy and self-determination. Hagner et al. (2014) reiterated that these elements are particularly lacking when IEP teams engage in post-secondary planning for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Hagner et al. (2014) focused on these two elements while investigating person-centered planning for students with ASD who benefit from being introduced to and participating in the IEP process.

Researchers describe cyber charter schools, a focus of this study, as schools that are independently governed. The instruction at cyber charter schools is conducted via the internet, absent of a brick-and-mortar setting. Collins et al. (2015) described cyber charter schools as becoming more mainstream and growing in appeal. Half of the states now present a cyber charter school option as an educational choice for parents, including parents of students with disabilities. With that in mind, there is a dearth of research focused on secondary students with disabilities who participate in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment. Therefore, the following research question guided this study: How do high school seniors with ASD perceive their involvement in IEP meetings within a cyber charter school environment?

Purpose and Significance of this Study

There is a gap in the research that addresses students with disabilities participating in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of high school seniors with ASD who participate in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment. The researcher attempted to obtain a deeper understanding of their perceptions.

Furthermore, there is a large body of research indicating poorer post-school outcomes for students with disabilities as compared to students without disabilities, particularly in the areas of post-school education, employment, and independent living. Research also argues that these students have negative experiences in their IEP meetings and little understanding of the IEP language or their disability. In addition, students report feeling like the adults talk about them, not directly to them. The literature also suggests that while students with disabilities who take part in their IEP meetings can face challenges, those challenges are even greater for students with ASD in terms of communication, anxiety, and other social difficulties. There is an increased need to encourage and prepare students with ASD to take an active role in their IEP meetings. When this occurs, gains in self-determination, self-confidence, engagement in schoolwork, and self-advocacy during and after high school can occur (Arakelian, 2017; Doronkin et al., 2020; Hagner et al., 2014; Kelley et al., 2011; Martin, 2017).

Given the urgency for students with ASD to take an active role in their IEP meetings, the significance of developing attributes such as self-determination and self-confidence are critical. Royer (2017) highlighted that educators should be charged "to move the student from the passenger's seat to the driver's seat of life" (p. 235). In doing so, it is necessary for educators to be creative with strategies that bring out the students' desire, drive, and the motivation necessary for them to speak on behalf of themselves. The research has been clear that students with disabilities, especially students with ASD, present challenges when participating in their IEP meetings. Barriers to effective communication with others, increased anxiety (depending on the circumstances and the

environment), and a deficit in social skills all contribute to a lack of attendance and participation (Arakelian, 2017; Doronkin et al., 2020; Hagner, et al., 2014; Kelley et al., 2011; Martin, 2017). To that end, Royer (2017) points to self-determination as a factor that can help lead students to a greater quality of life and independence.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the self-determination theoretical (SDT) framework. Deci et al. (2013) discussed that individuals are born with natural tendencies and a desire to grow and develop. The power of our ability to realize our human potential, especially under conditions that are favorable and advantageous, creates opportunities for each of us to flourish. Although humans are born with these natural tendencies, ongoing support from other individuals and continuous self-reflection and self-organization are required. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) suggested that the components of the SDT are associated with students' abilities to learn and be engaged in the learning process. Educators play an important role in understanding human motivation and the impact that it has on student adjustment, particularly the relationships that are developed between student and teacher. A strong relationship will yield positive results; however, weak relationships will leave students feeling disconnected. Regarding online learning, Chen and Jang (2010) concluded that the stages of the SDT also play a crucial role in a student's educational experience. In an online learning environment, students depend on a variety of supports (social and technical) that are provided by peers, teachers, and school administrators.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how high school seniors with ASD perceive their involvement in IEP meetings within a cyber charter school environment. Cyber charter schools have become an option for many parents,

including parents of students with disabilities. Some cyber charter schools offer students the opportunity to work at their own pace while teachers support the development of skills. These skills, as described in the SDT Framework, address academics, behavior, motivation, and independence. Research has determined that motivation is necessary to improve learning experiences (Royer, 2017). Given the large population of students with disabilities at the site of this research study, all stakeholders are responsible for supporting students' development based on the tenets of the SDT Framework. The framework served as the foundation for this study which explored how high school seniors with ASD perceived their involvement in IEP meetings within a cyber charter school setting.

Context

The setting for this research study was a K-12 public cyber charter school located in the country's Mid-Atlantic region and referred to as Works Cyber Charter School (WCCS). WCCS has three elementary schools. Each school serves students in grades K-5. The WCSS also has three middle schools, each serving students in grades 6-8, and four high schools, each serving students in grades 9-12.

WCCS saw a significant increase in student enrollment at the start of the global pandemic in March 2020, and this upward trend in enrollment continued. WCCS is currently providing an education to more than 24,000 students. WCCS also provides special education services to more than 7,200 students who are classified according to the 13 disabilities listed under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This group of 7,200 includes more than 2,400 secondary students with disabilities, almost 900 K-12 students with ASD, approximately 400 secondary students with ASD, and a little

over 100 students with ASD who receive itinerant level services in the learning support program. Approximately 51.7% of the students are female, 48.3% are male, 57.2% are White, 16.8% are African American, 17.6% are Hispanic, .31% are American Indian/Alaskan Native, .94% are Asian, .24% are Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 7.2% are multiracial. Regarding free and reduced meals, WCCS reported 58% of families were eligible under this designation. In the 2021-2022 school year, WCCS saw a 58.6% four-year cohort graduation rate and a 65.5% five-year cohort graduation rate.

This local education agency (LEA) is a public cyber charter school where all students learn virtually including students who are receiving special education services. The IEP teams at WCCS conduct IEP meetings virtually, and students who are transition ages are expected to attend and participate. Participants of the study were selected based on a classification of ASD that was determined by a psychoeducational evaluation administered by a certified school psychologist. Hagner et al. (2014) found that students with ASD are less likely to participate in their IEP meetings due to challenges in the areas of socialization, communication, and anxiety. Participants were three high school seniors receiving itinerant level services in the learning support program who could articulate their needs and verbally exchange information in a one-on-one, focus-group, or IEP-meeting setting.

Over the last two years, WCCS experienced growing numbers of students with ASD. This presented a solid opportunity to ascertain firsthand knowledge from students who qualified for special education services and faced individual challenges with participating and leading their IEP meetings. Their perceptions added value to the

research question, while seeking to understand how they could be further supported by the IEP team. Special education teachers at WCCS understood the significance of preparing students to participate in IEP meetings by strengthening their self-determination, confidence, and self-advocacy skills. Most importantly, research supports that the real student emerges once they are placed at the center of the IEP planning. When students' voices are heard and valued, students begin to take ownership of their education, improve their academic performance, increase social skills, and look for feedback from others to further advocate for themselves (Mason et al., 2002). Therefore, to contribute to what students expressed about their involvement in their education, student voice was at the center of this study.

Methodology

This qualitative study took a narrative inquiry approach. Creswell (2016) defined qualitative research as the "reporting on how people talk about things, how they describe things, and how they see the world" (p. 6). Creswell and Creswell (2018) added that qualitative research seeks to further explore "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). A narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that fits the goal of this research. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) concluded that it is in talking about things that individuals can make sense of their experiences and are able to understand the world around them. Narrative inquiry endorses the researcher to be directly involved in telling the story of the participants. Similarly, Creswell and Creswell (2018) asserted that the constructivist worldview is parallel to both the qualitative and narrative inquiry approach in that the subjective meaning that individuals attribute to their experiences provides the researcher room for further exploration. This further

exploration includes the interactions that individuals have with others; thus, this worldview, like narrative inquiry, tasks the researcher with interpreting the meaning others have about the world.

Looking further into how narrative inquiry has spoken to the experiences of human beings since the earliest historical records, Clandinin et al. (2016) proposed that stories matter and how researchers inquire about stories also matters. The researcher has a desire to know more about the stories that individuals live and then tell. This collaboration that occurs between the researcher and the participant develops over time and, through this development, a deeper understanding of the participant's words is revealed. The interest is not only in what is communicated about the events but in the exploration for deeper meaning. Therefore, the inquirer is charged with specific responsibilities: to listen, to examine, and to explain (Clandinin et al., 2016).

In this study, the researcher engaged in this work alongside the participants, high school seniors with ASD, from the moment the initial conversation about the study took place through the end of the process. Clandinin et al. (2016) presented a number of individual stories in which the narrative inquirer attended to the experiences of youth through watching, listening, and learning. For this study, the time the researcher spent in the space with the participant revealed who they were as individuals. With that established, the researcher gathered three sources of data including document reviews, interviews, and observations of IEP meetings.

First, IEPW, a special education data management system was used to access data. This database is the warehouse that lists the names and case managers of all WCCS students with disabilities and stores their IEP documents. IEPW allows reports to be

filtered and generated based on specific data requests. For the purposes of this study, report(s) were generated by an IEPW software specialist to determine how many high school seniors at WCCS were identified with ASD and which of those students received an itinerant level of service in the learning support programs. The IEPW software served as a resource throughout the study when additional filtering was needed to generate specific data. Furthermore, the researcher used the IEPW and the school's learning management system (LMS) to conduct a variety of document reviews.

The next stage of the study consisted of conducting interviews with students. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of the students' perceptions of attending, participating in or possibly leading their IEP meetings within a cyber charter school environment. According to Seidman (2019), interviewing allows the researcher an avenue of inquiry to gain a better understanding of the experiences of individuals. Specifically, the researcher engaged in narrative inquiry, which Creswell and Creswell (2018) further described as the stories of individuals being retold by the researcher using open-ended questions to go deeper into exploring participants' responses. The researcher conducted virtual interviews with each student. The parent or guardian was also present. The purpose of the interviews was to ascertain the perceptions of high school seniors regarding their involvement in their IEP meetings within a cyber charter school environment.

Last, virtual observations occurred with students who participated in their IEP meetings. Using an observation protocol, the researcher collected descriptive and reflective notes on student participation and involvement during these meetings.

Narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to retell the students' stories, based on their firsthand experiences. Their voices were important to the researcher, a seasoned educator, and their stories enable the researcher to continue to advocate and provide opportunities for students with disabilities.

While describing reflexivity, Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasized that past experiences can shape interpretations during a study. Therefore, it is essential that the researcher acknowledges their experiences and potential biases.

Role of the Researcher

For the past two years, the researcher served as one of the regional directors of special education at WCCS. Three major responsibilities in this role require the researcher to oversee the transition team, serve as LEA in IEP and IEP-related meetings, and ensure that students and parents/guardians are provided with resources that will enhance the educational programming while providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The researcher spent over twenty years in public education supporting students with disabilities and their families, primarily in urban communities that were underserved, unserved, or inadequately served. With that in mind, a potential bias that could arise during this study is based on the researcher's firsthand knowledge of the outcomes for students who were not prepared to participate in the IEP meeting or post-secondary transition process. When the outcomes were not favorable to students, the researcher worked with educators to find ways to improve the student's program. The researcher also acknowledged the perceived power deferential that could exist in the process of this study with the students and the case managers, given the researcher's administrative position within the special education department. Given this

acknowledgement and awareness of biases, the researcher recognized the narrative inquiry approach taken to pursue this study and the value of using such an approach where the researcher's perspective plays a role in the final product.

Limitations

Given the methodological approaches and choices for potential participants that were identified for this study, it was important to acknowledge and recognize the limitations of the research. Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) defined limitations as potential weaknesses that are usually out of the researcher's control" (p. 156). The first limitation was the focus on only one of the 13 disabilities, which was ASD. By using a purposeful and convenient sampling, the second limitation was recruiting a small number (3-5) of participants. The third limitation that affected the findings included teacher participation. Although teachers were not interviewed, they were members of the IEP team and were observed during the observation of the student's IEP meetings. The researcher does not supervise any of the special education teachers who served as case managers; however, due to the researcher's role as a special education director, special education teachers, unlike general education teachers, may have felt obligated to participate or felt that their performance during the IEP meeting was being evaluated. Because the study was conducted in a cyber charter school environment, the fourth limitation was that observations and interviews occurred virtually. As a result, there were no opportunities for in-person engagement, and the researcher was limited in observing non-verbal communication and other information regarding the setting that could have been useful in the data collection. Furthermore, by choosing to focus on the perceptions

of students only, a final limitation was the absence of teacher, parent, and guardian perceptions.

Given the setting and sample size, it is important to note that the results of this study were not intended to be generalizable, which Creswell and Creswell (2018) refer to as "applying individual findings to sites or places outside of the study" (p. 202). Rather, transferability, which Terrell (2016) describes as "thick descriptions of your results" (p. 174). Through narrative inquiry, the researcher offers considerable detail to portray the stories of the participants' lives based on their specific interest and their individual educational experiences.

Definition of Terms

Self-determination – Acting as the primary causal agent in one's life, making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference (Thoma et al., 2008).

Individual education program - A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised on an annual basis (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014).

Autism spectrum disorder – A lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder presenting early in a child's development with variable impairments in social communication interactions and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior (Layden et al., 2022).

Online learning – Web-based learning environments that are used to deliver some form of instruction to learners separated by time, distance or both (Chen & Jang, 2010).

Post-secondary outcomes – Includes a students' participation in college/university, career technology education, competitive integrated employment and independent living (Chandroo et al., 2018).

Individual with disabilities education act (IDEA) – A 1990 federal law that replaced the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) and required that school districts provide instruction, services and supports needed for students with disabilities to make effective progress in schools (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014).

Student-focused planning – Identifying students' strengths, preferences, interests, and needs by involving students in the IEP process and allowing students to have a voice (Chandroo et al. 2018).

Student IEP participation – the ability for students to be actively involved in the planning and preparation of their IEP and be a key contributor during the IEP meeting (Cavendish et al., 2017).

Summary

Extensive research has determined that students with disabilities experience poorer post-school outcomes compared to their non-disabled peers in the areas of post-secondary education, employment and independent living. There is also a large percentage of students with disabilities who have negative experiences during their IEP meetings. More importantly, students with ASD present greater challenges during these meetings due to struggles with communication, anxiety, and social interaction. Students with ASD can be successful in participating and leading their IEP meetings when given the type of support that includes their talents and their voices and encourages

independence (Arakelian, 2017; Doronkin et al., 2020; Hagner et al., 2014; Kelley et al., 2011; Martin, 2017).

To address a gap in research, this qualitative study explored the involvement of high school seniors with ASD participating in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment with the goal of gaining a better understanding of their perceptions regarding their experiences. Chapter Two discusses the following themes generated from the literature: Education for All Handicapped Children's Act, Individual with Disabilities Education Act, the individual education plan, ASD, student-centered planning, self-determination, and the SDT. The literature review concludes with a summary and examines the implications for students, IEP teams, and schools. Chapter Three describes the research methodology used in this study. Chapter Four presents a description of each participant and outlines the four themes that emerged from the data, based on the participants' individual stories. Furthermore, an explanation of how each participant's experiences align with the SDT is also provided. Chapter Five discusses the findings based on the research question, limitations, considerations for educators and administrators at WCCS, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two

As members of the IEP team, special education teachers are more likely to be seen as the leaders of a student's IEP meeting. The special education teacher is often considered the individual who is the most knowledgeable regarding student data, communicating with parents and caregivers, and working with other members of the IEP team to develop student goals. However, the research overwhelmingly indicates that when students with disabilities attend and participate in their IEP meetings, they experience greater successful outcomes post-graduation. (Arivett et al., 2007; Martin, 2017).

Despite the fact that IDEA only requires that a student with a disability be invited to the IEP meeting, Kozik (2018) reiterated that as students with disabilities grow older, it becomes even more important that they are empowered to fully participate. Nevertheless, "school units are not doing enough to engage with the diversity that students with special education needs represent" (p. 115) and the area of student needs, interests, and preferences are the least discussed at the IEP meeting. Kozik (2018) further emphasized the value of building trust among members of the IEP team. Trust enhances the collaboration of the participants, allows members to work in the best interest of students, and increases the level of student engagement, which produces successful outcomes.

Sanderson et al. (2021) attributed the lack of student attendance and participation in IEP meetings to the vague requirements of IDEA 2004 regarding student attendance and participation and the low expectations that adults have of students' participation. Unfortunately, Sanderson et al. (2021) concluded some adults may assume that a student with a disability is not capable of contributing to decisions regarding their educational

goals and supports. This perception often results in missed opportunities for invaluable collaboration.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the literature focused on the involvement of students with disabilities, specifically students with ASD, in their IEP meetings. The following themes will be explored: special education laws beginning with the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (EACHA), the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), the individual education program (IEP), a description of ASD, and student-centered planning. Furthermore, to better understand the importance of students with ASD directing their own lives, the literature review will explore self-determination as a theme as well as discuss the self-determination theory which guides this study. The review will conclude with examining the implications for students with ASD who participate in IEP meetings, members who make up the IEP team, and public-schools.

It is important to note that the research discussed in this literature review was primarily based on several findings from studies conducted on various levels of participation of secondary school students with disabilities (educators and families) in their IEP meetings in traditional brick-and-mortar school settings.

The Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (EAHCA)

Every child has a right to an education. Before the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (EAHCA) in 1975, there were nearly two million children in the United States between the ages of seven and seventeen who did not have access to a public education. Included in this number is a large population of handicapped children. Between 1948 and 1963, fewer than twenty states were providing public education to less than 31% of handicapped children; eleven states educated well below

20% of handicapped children; and seven states educated only 51% of handicapped children. In 1974, The Children's Defense Fund declared that

> out of school children share a common characteristic of differentness by virtue of race, income, physical, mental, or emotional handicap and age. They are, for the most part out of school not by choice but because they have been excluded. (p. 6)

Two landmark cases set in motion what would be groundbreaking victories for handicapped children. One case took place in Pennsylvania and the other in the District of Columbia (Zettel & Ballard, 1979).

The *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) class action lawsuit was brought forth by the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) and the families of 13 mentally retarded children who alleged that the Commonwealth of PA refused to provide a public education to handicapped children. Not only did the PARC and the 13 families prevail in no longer denying mentally retarded children access to a public education but the court's decision required states to "locate and identify all school-age retarded children who were excluded from the public schools and to place them in a free public program of education and training appropriate to the capacity" (Zettel & Ballard, 1979, p. 9).

The *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972) class action lawsuit produced by seven District of Columbia (DC) parents and guardians of handicapped children alleged the denial of entrance to or the exclusion from publicly supported programs, and the labeling of students without proper evaluation. Like PARC, the seven DC parents and guardians won. The ruling required the District of Columbia to provide a publicly supported education to all handicapped children regardless of the

severity of the student's disability. Over the next two-and-a-half years, 46 lawsuits subsequently followed and each one succeeded in delivering a public education to handicapped children (Zettel & Ballard, 1979).

The Education for all Handicapped Children's Act (EAHCA), also known as Public Law 4-142, passed on November 29, 1975. PL 94-142 declared that all children between the ages of three and 18 were entitled to an education despite their disability. Children who were handicapped also won five other state-mandated rights that public schools were required to provide. These rights included non-discriminatory testing, evaluation, and placement procedures; education in the least restrictive environment (LRE); due process; a free education; and an appropriate education. EACHA was amended in 1986 to include early intervention for infants, birth to three years old, and to award costs to parents or guardians who prevail in civil lawsuits regarding a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for their school-age children (Zettel & Ballard, 1979).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

In June 1990, under former President Clinton, the Education for All Handicapped Act, Public Law 101-476, became the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and expanded services for students with disabilities. IDEA has the following six foundational principles:

1. Zero reject: Schools cannot deny or reject a student to their right to public education regardless of the nature or severity of their disability.
2. Least restrictive environment (LRE): The student will be educated with other students without disabilities to the maximum extent possible.

3. Non-Discriminatory identification and evaluation: Identification and evaluation procedures must not discriminate based on race, native language, or ethnicity.
4. Due process safeguards: When families and school disagree about placement, evaluations, services, etc., a due process hearing can take place.
5. Free appropriate public education (FAPE): Students, regardless of their disability, are entitled to free education in the public school system.
6. Parent and student participation and decision making: Schools must work with parents and students regarding education decisions (Martin, 2017).

Moreover, the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 was designed to ensure academic expectations and accountability for students with disabilities and bridge the gap between what students with disabilities learn what the general education curriculum requires. However, reforms from the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 provided greater emphasis on improving the academic and functional outcomes for students with disabilities. Three reforms, in particular, redefined the *term transition services* to include the following: a results-oriented process based on post-secondary education, employment, and independent living; a change in the secondary transition requirements in the IEP for students beginning at ages 16 or 14 in some states; and an LEA requirement to invite the student to the IEP meeting for the purposes of discussing post-secondary goals (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; Martin et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2006a). IDEA recognizes 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
10. Specific learning disability
11. Speech or language impairment
12. Traumatic brain injury
13. Visual impairment

The Individual Education Program

In 1975, the EACHA required all public school districts to provide students with disabilities the proper educational services and supports at no cost to families and place students in the same environment with their non-disabled peers to the extent that it is possible (Blackwell & Rosetti, 2014). The primary tool used to document these services and support is the individual education plan (IEP). Blackwell and Rosetti (2014) defined the IEP as "a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised" (p. 2). Over two million students receiving special education services are provided with an annual IEP designed to meet their needs (Barnard-Brak & Fearon, 2012). IDEA, which replaced EACHA in 1990, was reauthorized in 1997 and 2004. The reauthorizations included increasing coordination of services between general and special education teachers and aligning the IEP with the goals of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) so that special education services are focused on academic needs, not

just behavioral or functional concerns. The IEP became better known as the cornerstone for IDEA.

Once it is determined by qualified professional(s) that a student meets the criteria for one of the thirteen disabilities established by IDEA, local education agencies (LEA) are required to provide an IEP for a student (and provide FAPE) to coordinate special education services and conduct at least one meeting a year to develop specific objectives, goals, and outcomes for the student's instructional program. IEP meetings should occur whether services are provided in a general or special education setting (Barnard-Brak & Fearon, 2012; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. Section 300.320 (2004), the IEP itself includes the following components.

- **Current performance:** The IEP must state how the student is currently performing academically, behaviorally, and functionally in school (known as present levels of educational performance).
- **Annual goals:** Written goals designed to be reasonably accomplished by the student in a year and easily measured through consistent data collection. The goals are divided into short-term objectives or benchmarks. Goals may be academic, address social or behavioral needs, relate to physical needs, or address other educational needs.
- **Special education and related services:** The IEP includes descriptions of supplementary aids and services that the student needs. It also includes modifications (changes) to the program or supports for school personnel—such as training or professional development—that will be provided to assist the student.

- **Participation with nondisabled children:** The IEP must explain the extent (if any) to which the student will not participate with nondisabled children in the regular class and other school activities.
- **Participation in state and district-wide tests:** The IEP must state the needed modifications in the administration of any district or statewide tests, such as extended time, sections read aloud to the student, etc. If a test is not appropriate for the student, the IEP must state why the test is not appropriate and how the student will be tested instead.
- **Dates and places:** The IEP details when services will begin, how often they will be provided, where they will be provided, and how long they will last.
- **Transition:** Beginning when the student is age 14 in PA (or younger, if appropriate), the IEP must address (within the applicable parts of the IEP) the courses they need to take to reach their post-school goals. A statement of transition services needs must also be included in each of the student's subsequent IEPs.
- **Needed transition services:** Beginning when the student is age 16 (or younger, if appropriate), the IEP must state what transition services are needed to help the child prepare for leaving school.
- **Age of majority:** Beginning at least one year before the student reaches the age of majority, the IEP must include a statement that the student has been told of any rights that will transfer to him or her at the age of majority. (Note: This statement is required only in states that transfer rights at the age of majority.)

- **Measuring progress:** The IEP describes in detail what data will be collected to monitor a student's progress and how parents will be informed of that progress.

Kurth and Mastergeorge (2010) discussed the growing number of students with ASD in public schools and the need for special education teams to understand how best to serve each student based on their specific and unique needs. In a study that examined certain IEP areas of focus for students with ASD, the researchers found that although the needs are unique and very individualized, the student's setting, grade level, progress, and other variables are all considered when creating programs that will best meet the needs for students with ASD. Options for educational settings could include inclusion or non-inclusion classrooms. In addition, the researchers discovered that IEPs of students with ASD contained a greater percentage of communication goals (versus academic), specifically for those students who are included in the general education program. Communication, social skills, behavior, and sensory regulation are a few of the characteristics for which students with ASD may require assistance.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Leo Kanner identified autism in 1943, and autism was recognized by IDEA in 1990 as a new category of disability. According to Daljeet (2019), the DSM-IV labeled ASD as one of the five neurodevelopment disorders under the umbrella of pervasive developmental disorders (PDD). The other four were high-functioning autism (HFA), childhood disintegrative disorder, Asperger's syndrome (AS), and PDD not otherwise specified (PDD NOS), all typically diagnosed in the first few years of life. In 2013, the DSM-V determined that the five pervasive developmental disorders would be combined under a single diagnosis.

Autism is a lifelong condition, and its causes are unknown. The disorders associated with ASD are complex. As a developmental disability, ASD can significantly affect verbal and nonverbal communication as well as social interaction. It is generally evident before the age of three and can adversely affect a child's educational performance (Muratidis, 2009; IDEA, 2004). Students with ASD can exhibit behaviors that also include repetition of activities, an opposition to changes in routine or environment, and an unusual response related to the five senses. Children with ASD also demonstrate a variety of individual differences, but common themes among them are challenges with social interaction, decreased abilities to demonstrate imaginative play, and a lack of verbal communication. For post-secondary students with ASD, difficulty in demonstrating executive functioning skills can impact success across domains and require more educator informed support (Elias et al., 2017). A student with severe ASD could demonstrate difficulty with speech and language. Like all students with disabilities, students with ASD benefit from a continuum of services in appropriate settings to achieve the least restrictive environment (LRE). These settings can range from participation in general education classes to residential schools that provide total care 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Alamri & Tyler-Wood, 2016).

Hagner et al. (2014) noted that students with disabilities who take part in IEP meetings can face challenges, but for students with ASD, participation can pose an even greater challenge. The challenges students with ASD face in terms of communication, anxiety, and other social difficulties related to engaging in a group can add to the student's resistance to involvement in educational meetings. Similarly, Hagner et al. (2012) revealed that there are a significant number of young adults with ASD that are not

able to successfully make the transition from high school to higher education/training or the workforce. In fact, many young adults with ASD typically attend sheltered workshops or day activity programs. Furthermore, in a study involving interviews with special education staff and parents in two specialist schools in England, Fayette and Bond (2018) found that anxiety, fear of communication, and difficulty conceptualizing the future was a barrier to participation for students with ASD. The researchers indicated that students preferred to have their parents attend the IEP meeting and then retrieve the information later from them.

Nevertheless, Chandroo et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of teachers encouraging students with ASD to attend their IEP meetings; however, the researcher highlighted that attendance alone is not enough, and educators must empower students with ASD to take an active role. In the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) conducted by Griffin et al. (2014), the researchers found that students with ASD who attended their IEP meetings expressed themselves more, displayed increased engagement in conversation about post-school plans with their families, and spent more time in the general education setting. Educators should provide explicit instruction in the necessary skills, which means placing the student at the center of the planning.

Student-Centered Planning

Numerous studies have indicated that when students are involved in their own educational planning, there is an increase in ownership of IEP goals and self-efficacy, and a decrease in the number of student dropouts. Educators play a significant role in involving the parents of students with disabilities in their student's planning and, more importantly, ensuring that the planning is centered around and with the student

(Cavendish et al., 2017; Hagner et al., 2014; Sanderson et al., 2021). Research identifies three areas of importance surrounding effective student-centered planning: building relationships, using parent and student voices, and providing tools to improve the involvement of students with disabilities in their IEP meetings.

Cavendish et al. (2017) emphasized that building relationships with students and their families before, during, and after the development of the IEP must involve family engagement, one of the five practices aligned with Kohler's taxonomy for transition planning. Getting to know students and their families at the beginning of the IEP process increases the chances that communication will remain open, ensuring regularity in reporting progress. These reports to parents can be delivered in several ways; however, technology has proven to be the strongest messenger. Digital student portfolios can be shared immediately and enhance collaboration. Furthermore, in a study conducted with 47 secondary students with ASD in New Hampshire and Maine to determine how student-centered planning is used to build relationships with families and students with ASD, Hagner et al. (2014) suggested accommodation approaches that can be implemented before and during the IEP meeting. The study examined individualized preparation meetings, rapport-building activities, flexible meeting designs, a variety of distance attendance options, and the incorporation of student interests as strategies that can be used to make the student comfortable with the facilitator and the IEP team and ensure participation.

Student, family, and educator voices should guide the IEP process. Research has widely acknowledged that involving families and students in educational planning is an indicator of meaningful outcomes for students with disabilities. However, this is not a

typical practice. Childres and Chambers (2005) proposed using the student-centered individualized education planning (SCIEP) tool to incorporate person-centered techniques and gain family perspectives. The researcher's purposeful sampling included six families with middle school students receiving services for orthopedic impairments and/or moderate intellectual disabilities in a rural southeastern school district. Families perceived the use of the SCIEP by the IEP team as a more favorable approach to understanding the student's needs versus the traditional IEP meeting. A recurring theme was improved communication. Families perceived the communication as a change in the way information is shared among the IEP team which was more reflective of a true collaboration.

Similarly, in a three-year quantitative study, Martin et al. (2004) attempted to gain a better understanding of perspectives from various IEP team members based on secondary transition IEP meetings. The researchers discovered major differences in how team members responded, especially students who were present at their meetings. The survey indicated that teachers spoke more frequently at meetings, students knew significantly less in all areas from the other team members, students talked more about their interests and parents more about what went on at the meetings when the student was present. Prior research conducted by (Martin et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2002) concluded that students did not understand what was taking place in the meetings. They were bored, felt ignored by the team, or felt their viewpoints were not valued. If there were no prior instructions detailing what they should know or do, students felt at a loss and regarded the meeting as a meaningless activity. These findings further validate the importance of elevating students' voices.

In contrast, Kozik (2018) explored the method of using appreciate inquiry (AI) to increase student self-advocacy in IEP meetings. AI is "a method of development which engages participants in discussions about past successes to create a vision for the future" (p. 114). In a comparative study of three rural public schools in New York State, the researcher found that when using the five principles of AI (social construction, simultaneity, the poetic, anticipatory principle, and positive thinking) along with AI's focus on the 4D-cycle (discovery, dream, design, and destiny), there was an increase in students' positive interactions, turn-taking, and self-advocacy during the IEP meetings. Similarly, Hapner and Imel (2002) conducted interviews concerning student involvement in IEP meetings with teachers and secondary students with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds in a district in the Mid-Atlantic region. Teachers expressed that student participation provided opportunities for students to learn more about themselves, their strengths, and challenges. Student perceptions were similar. One student expressed, "School changed for me after I led my IEP meeting. My teachers understood me better; they became more helpful, like friends" (p. 126). Moreover, Mason et al. (2002) found that parent involvement increased when students became involved in their IEPs, a stronger relationship developed between the parent and child, and students felt good because their parents were proud. Some parents were even surprised at how well their children handled themselves while leading the IEP meeting.

Hagner et al. (2014) defined person-centered planning as "a technique based on a set of core elements but open to a variety of options and formats to achieve a personalized approach to learning" (p. 8). This approach has been found to be useful in enhancing social support for students with disabilities. Student-focused planning and

student development are two practices that Cavendish (2017) considered essential for students with disabilities to improve their involvement in IEP meetings. Williams-Diehm et al. (2008) proposed that a student's participation in IEP meetings can take different forms—from leading the IEP meeting to non-involvement, which means being physically present but not making any contributions towards the IEP goals or progress. The researchers also noted the importance of limiting individuals in the meeting who do not offer strong support to the student.

Cavendish (2017) recognized the importance of conducting student-teacher pre-IEP meetings to increase participation and increase student's knowledge about themselves and the process. One pre-IEP meeting guide focused on prompts for students to consider based on their present levels of performance and current academic and transition goals. A study conducted by Williams-Diehm and Lynch (2007) added to the research which surveyed 103 secondary students with disabilities in Texas to determine student knowledge of transition planning and their role in the process. The ten-question survey tool attempted to gain knowledge of how well students understood the purpose of their transition plan and whether or not the goals had been reached. It also sought to capture student recommendations on how the planning process could be improved. The results indicated that students needed more guidance and support from their teachers.

The Student Directed IEP (SDIEP) is a "field tested curriculum designed to teach students to actively participate in their IEP meetings" (p. 195). Arndt et al. (2006) and Martin et al. (2006b) validated the effectiveness of the SDIEP tool in studies with middle and high school students with disabilities, including ASD. With this intervention, students led more IEP meetings, spoke more frequently, and took more of a leadership

role during the meetings. The researchers found this intervention to be user friendly with student accommodations. More importantly, the researchers reported that for students to be active participants in their IEP meetings in middle and high school, it is advantageous for them to be exposed to the planning in the upper elementary years. SDIEP was also used by Diegelman and Test (2018) on four students identified with either intellectual or multiple disabilities who expressed needs using verbal speech to determine if the self-monitoring checklist was effective in helping students gain knowledge of the steps involved in leading their IEP meetings. The results indicated that three of the four students were unable to reach mastery of the steps of the IEP until provided with the support of the SDIEP checklist. These results supported the SDIEP as an evidence-based checklist and encouraged educators to allow students to begin exploring their transition goals prior to high school. The purpose is to create a platform for students to develop their voices so that at each annual IEP meeting, students will be able to articulate their success and areas of growth.

Similarly, Kelley et al. (2011) used a multiple probe design and studied three secondary students identified with higher-functioning intellectual disabilities who were provided with the SDIEP tool using computer assisted instruction (CAI) facilitated by a teacher. Results indicated a functional relationship between students using the CAI while being administered the SDIEP and students' ability to lead their own planning meetings.

Self-Determination

While the research regarding the relationship between self-determination and student involvement is growing, researchers have provided consistent evidence supporting the correlation between self-determination and the post-secondary success that

students with disabilities experience during and upon exiting high school—which leads to an improved quality of life as adults. More importantly, despite disabilities, self-determination empowers individuals to self-direct their own lives. Building upon self, Williams-Diehm et al. (2008) illustrated the difference in self vs. others, which emphasized individuals making conscious choices to act based on their own will as opposed to the will of others. Thoma and Getzel (2005) define self-determination as "one's ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (p. 235). Researchers continued to expand on this definition. For example, Cavendish et al. (2017) added the components of the three basic needs described in the self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These three components, combined with goal-directed and self-regulated behaviors, contribute to self-determination. Furthermore, self-determination should be absent of any external influences that might otherwise drive an individual's choices (Walters et al., 2022; Wehmeyer et al., 2007).

The literature described 12 emergent self-determination subskills considered to be important for anyone, but particularly students with disabilities involved in transition planning as part of the individual education plan. These subskills are choice/decision-making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, independence, risk taking and safety skills, self-observation, evaluation and reinforcement skills, self-instruction, self-advocacy and leadership, internal locus of control, positive attributes of efficacy and outcome expectancy, self-awareness, and self-knowledge (Patti, 2010; Thoma & Getzel, 2005). Several studies of students with disabilities and parents of students with

disabilities have been conducted to determine which self-determination subskills are most important and how are they identified.

In a study of 34 students with disabilities across the state of Virginia who participated in post-secondary activities, Thoma & Getzel (2005) found that although students considered the 12 emergent self-determination sub skills to be important factors in their school success, students identified four of the 12 subskills they believe to be paramount to maintaining success. These skills were problem-solving, understanding one's disability, goal setting, and self-management. In this study, students with disabilities unanimously stated that problem-solving skills were necessary. Students accepted the perpetual problems and roadblocks; nevertheless, they understood that students must figure out how to get around problems by setting priorities and knowing the limitations in the path. Even though the approach to problem solving looks different for students, one could focus on how to get around problems and "learn to be the squeaky wheel because 75-80% of the problems students face are with others" (p. 237).

Students in the study reported having learned about their individual disabilities through the internet or doctors. Therefore, students felt it was important to understand their disability, even if no one else did. This helped students to gain a greater sense of self-determination and a deeper understanding of who they really are. Thoma and Getzel (2005) established that goal setting must be realistic and grounded in the desires of the students, otherwise the meaning is lost. Goals, just like subjects taught in school, must be broken down so that they can be understood and practiced. Students overwhelmingly believe that high expectations from parents and other adults help them believe that goals can be achieved despite challenges. Students in the study reported that self-management

increased their ability to manage their daily schedules. It is important to “allot time to study, actually plan time, look at time and figure out how to use it” (p. 238).

Cavendish et al. (2017) expanded on this research, establishing that student involvement in educational planning and self-determination produced results and student choice is related to positive outcomes. The researchers acknowledged that for students to experience self-determination and decision-making, educators need to take time to develop these skills in students as they are working towards individual goals Their study examined meaningful participation in IEP and transition planning among high school students with disabilities and their parents. Student’s decision making in available course selections, multiple pathways to graduation, college and vocational options, and competitive employment all present opportunities for students to be supported in taking charge of their own needs. The work of Patti (2010) aligns with Cavendish et al. (2017) by emphasizing the use of self-determination in context. Results of surveys completed by 234 parents produced strong support of students learning self-determination in school, particularly if it meant improving participation in IEP meetings. In contrast, results of surveys completed by a mixture of 248 general and special education teachers demonstrated that educators were not as familiar with the context of teaching self-determination. Teachers pointed to limited opportunities in high school for students to take advantage of learning and applying self-determination skills. A survey administered five years later with 340 general and special education teachers revealed that self-determination was being taught anywhere from sometimes to often. Patti (2010) could not determine if this increase in frequency was due to an increase in teacher knowledge related to self-determination instruction or the use of a self-report measure.

In addition, Wehmeyer et al. (2011) reiterated that when students with disabilities are allowed to participate in their educational planning, self-determination is enhanced. Based on a study of middle and high school students with disabilities, the researchers discovered that students demonstrated significant gains in self-determination after receiving instruction in the Whose Future is it Anyway (WFA) intervention. Nevertheless, how educators perceive students with disabilities acquiring self-determination skills and participating in IEP and transition planning meetings can make the difference. Thoma and Getzel (2005), working with 34 students with disabilities across the state who participated in post-secondary activities, identified three sub-skills students believed assisted them in learning self-determination. These skills are trial and error, finding support from peers/mentors, and being taught by parents.

According to this study, Thoma and Getzel (2005) found trial and error were the most popular sub-skills reported by students with disabilities. Resilience was a special skill that students learned as apart of embracing self-determination. It was a skill that students gradually learned over time and experienced in their own ways. One student in the study reported, “Make sure you know what your rights are and work with the people to get what you want, not forcefully, but assertively, until you get what you are entitled to” (p. 238). There is greater ownership of the problem and the solution when students experience trial and error. Finding support from peers/mentors provided a network of individuals with similar interests and challenges. Another student added, “Get people with disabilities together to learn from others with disabilities” (p. 238). This strategy helped students learn their rights, get firsthand knowledge from individuals who were role models, and develop meaningful relationships. Student perceptions of parental

support added to learning self-determination skills. Students reported that their knowledge was provided by parents, guardians, and extended family or they simply learned how to do things on their own (Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

As IEP teams continue to support students with disabilities, self-determination is a critical component for effective transition planning to foster self-determined adults. The building of self-determination skills are influenced by students' motivation. This motivation exemplifies facets of the self-determination theory. Grant and Onsloo (2014) describe the theoretical framework as the blueprint for a house, emphasizing that the theoretical framework is the electricity, the power, that runs throughout the dissertation. Therefore, in this study, the blueprint, the electricity, is built upon the tenets of the self-determination theory (SDT).

Self-Determination Theory

Researchers have described SDT as a framework for understanding human motivation and personality. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) discovered that instead of educators focusing on the natural curiosity, love of learning, and thirst for knowledge that individuals possess, they instead introduce a climate of learning that produces either a reward or punishment outcome. Creating a climate that offers students limited ways to express their inquiring minds puts unnecessary pressure on educators to rely on external controls, among them being strict evaluations. Hence, the feelings of joy, enthusiasm, and interest that should accompany learning for students are often replaced with anxiety, boredom, and isolation, leading to a disinterest in what is being taught.

Regarding these feelings that lead to disinterest, Ryan and Deci (2000) further emphasized that "it is also clear that the human spirit can be diminished or crushed and

those individuals sometimes reject growth and responsibility" (p. 68). This rejection can be evident in personal, professional, and educational life. Furthermore, Chen and Jang (2010) stated that SDT can be applied to a variety of settings. Researchers agree on two central tenets of the SDT. The first tenet proposes the three universal and basic needs that humans possess. They are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The second tenet of SDT theorizes three categories on which human motivation on the self-determination continuum rests: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (Chen & Jang, 2010; Deci et al., 2013; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness

Like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the SDT is manifested when autonomy, competence and relatedness needs are met, particularly in the classroom. A student's motivation to learn and be engaged is also increased. Chen and Jang (2010) describe autonomy as feeling a sense of control over one's life. Student voices and their ability to make choices in how they learn are important. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) concluded that the idea of student voice and choice can best be supported when teachers minimize the pressures of evaluative procedures or the appearance of forced learning and replace them with activities that support a student's ability to demonstrate their individualized understanding of how they learn material. Using these practices in the elementary setting, the researchers found that younger students with increased autonomous behaviors were viewed by their teachers as being well-adjusted and having higher academic achievements in the classroom.

Additionally, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) studied and compared high school students in the United States and Russia and found that when parents and teachers

supported student autonomy, a greater internalization of academic motivation existed. The researchers further determined that when students understood the *why* of what was being taught, they demonstrated an increased motivation to learn.

Deci et al. (2013) expanded on the idea of necessity and choice, indicating that "people will feel like the initiators of their actions and will act in ways that are coherent with their interest and values" (p. 113). However, the researchers carefully acknowledged that autonomy does not include being independent. Individuals can be both autonomously independent and at the same time be autonomously dependent on others. Parents who support children and teachers who support students' autonomy help facilitate positive outcomes. Also, it is important to recognize that autonomy is not a stage of development. It evolves from infancy through late adulthood and looks somewhat different in each stage of life. Finally, the researchers emphasized individuals' capacity to create more satisfying lives given the ability to regulate their own actions (Deci et al., 2013).

Researchers define competence as allowing students to expand their academic capabilities. This expansion can occur through various types of activities that challenge students and push them to areas beyond their reach. Yet, Deci et al. (2013) clarified that it is not what an individual knows that it is important but rather the ability to perceive oneself as being capable of deeper learning. Although, not always recognized as a fundamental human need, competence involves psychological wellness as much as it does intellectual wellness. Competence should be viewed as a prerequisite for realizing one's human potential. Furthermore, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) suggested that educators can support competency in students by introducing materials that are rigorous. High expectations must be incorporated into lessons that are infused with appropriate

resources. Regular and ongoing feedback helps to increase confidence and connect the effects that students are having on their own learning as they work at mastering the task at hand.

The third basic and universal need is relatedness, which Chen and Jang (2010) defined as feeling included or affiliated with others. Expanding on this definition, Deci et al. (2013) added that relatedness implies the need to develop and sustain emotional bonds with others. The researchers then linked the need for relatedness to human survival and explained the reasons individuals interact harmoniously with others in a group. Students whose gifts and talents are unconditionally recognized and supported by parents are more likely to stay focused and flourish in their aspirations. Educators also play an enormous role in students' ability to feel connected. People tend to internalize and adopt the values and practices of others to whom they feel an attachment and with whom they have a sense of belonging. Hence, given the arduous tasks involved in learning, students need to feel that they are genuinely valued and respected by educators, thus increasing self-motivation.

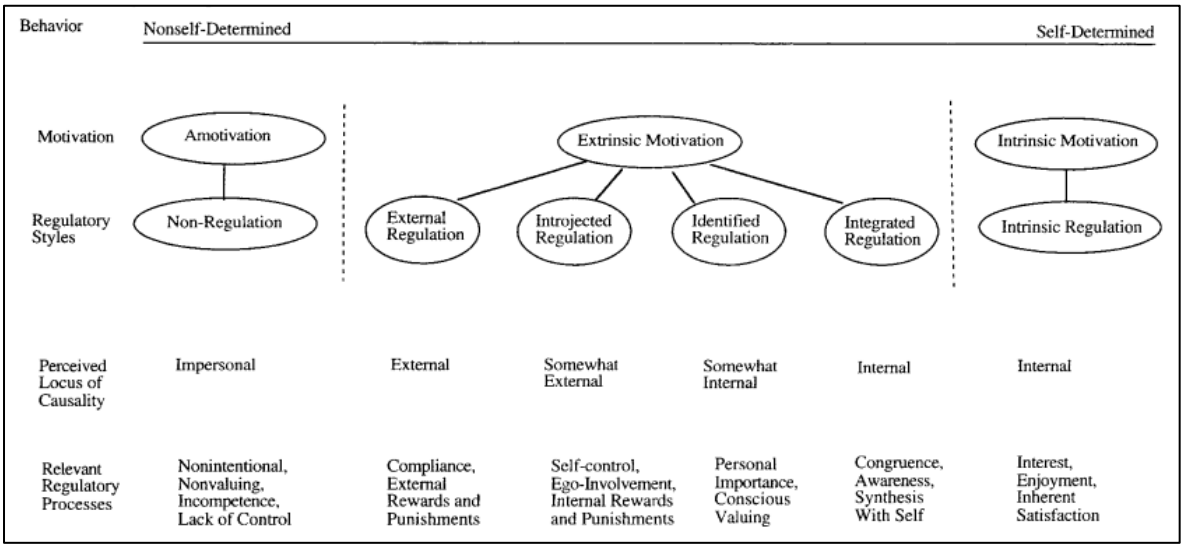
While researching motivation in online learning, Chen and Jang (2010) found that when students are supported in the three basic human needs in a virtual environment, students' perceptions of these basic needs are positively impacted. The researchers emphasized that "individuals experience an elaborate sense of self and achieve better psychological wellbeing through the satisfaction of the three basic needs" (p. 742). While this is true, it is also important to recognize that the absence of these needs can produce feelings of alienation. While autonomy, competence, and relatedness add to student agency, researchers agree that human behavior is also built on what motivates learning.

Intrinsic, Extrinsic and Amotivation

The second tenet of SDT theorizes three categories on which human motivation on the self-determination continuum rests: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation (Chen & Jang, 2010; Deci et al., 2013; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Figure 1 provides an image of the self-determination continuum and identifies the non-regulated and regulated behaviors under the three categories.

Figure 1

The Self-Determination Continuum



Note: From *"*Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being" by M. R. Ryan and L. E. Deci, 2000, *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), p. 72. (https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68). Reprinted with permission.

Researchers have defined the first category, *intrinsic motivation*, as engaging in activities that are enjoyable, challenging, and pleasing. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) added that this motivation appears in the absence of any external stimuli, while Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that "perhaps no single phenomenon reflects the positive potential of

human nature as intrinsic motivation" (p. 70). Even from the moment of birth and absent any external rewards, children are inquisitive and curious, and this can serve as a source of enjoyment throughout life. However, Deci et al. (2013) discovered from the work on SDT, social development, and well-being that despite the tendency for intrinsic motivation, there exists a need for it to be enhanced and maintained. Otherwise, the intrinsic motivation can be disrupted by non-supportive conditions. Thus, researchers closely examined what is needed for students to sustain intrinsic motivation and agreed that the two main factors are a willingness to devote their time and energy to studies and a feeling that they possess the ability to meet the demands of schoolwork. Conversely, findings of multiple studies indicate that providing students with tangible extrinsic rewards undermined the intrinsic motivation and diminished the sense of autonomy (Deci et al., 2013; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In a qualitative study, Frazier (2015) examined how educators used instructional practices and family reinforcement interventions as methods to increase intrinsic motivation for students with disabilities aspiring to meet graduation requirements. Factors that had the greatest impact on instructional practices included collaboration, relevant/meaningful learning, and relationships. Specifically, when educators implement activities that reinforce intrinsic goals, students experience a "deeper comprehension of the learning material, greater theoretical appreciation of it, and both short- and long-term persistence at relevant learning tasks" (p. 8). Moreover, research indicates that these practices benefit the achievements of students with and without disabilities.

The second main category of human motivation is *extrinsic motivation*, defined by researchers as performing an activity to gain something other than the pleasure of

participating in the activity. Deci et al. (2013) explained that what is gained could be any type of reward that is provided by someone or something. There are four categories that comprise extrinsic motivation. Individuals who demonstrate *external regulation* do so based on external stimuli, pressures, or threats of punishment. Negative consequences often will result. *Introjected regulation* does have some internalization; however, individuals are driven to perform a behavior because of a sense of guilt or feelings of shame. When individuals believe that their behaviors are necessary because of personal or professional development, they are motivated *by identified regulation*, and *integrated motivation* describes individuals who are motivated by their personal values or religious beliefs (Deci et al., 2013).

The third main category of human motivation is *amotivation*, defined by researchers as lacking intention to act or placing no value on the outcome of behaviors. Although amotivation has less negative impact on psychological functioning, students who are amotivated stand a greater risk of failing or dropping out of school. Research also discovered that when students with disabilities are not supported academically and motivationally by educators and caregivers, there is a decrease in academic and social performance which leads to an increase in student dropout rates (Deci et al., 2013; Frazier, 2015; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Finally, Chen and Jang (2010) proposed three SDT strategies to support self-determination in students with and without disabilities. Educators should understand that students deserve to know the rationale of why they are asked to learn what they are being taught and the relevance of that information to their lives and environment. By providing students with choices in their own learning versus dictating activities, a relationship is

established that builds trust. Educators who are willing to work towards supporting students in their efforts to increase self-determination do so by meeting their learning needs and adjusting instructions.

Summary and Implications of Literature Review

Although the research reveals a gap in the literature regarding secondary students with disabilities participating in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment, a significant amount of research indicates positive outcomes for students with disabilities who participate in their IEP meetings compared with students who are not involved in the process. The same is true for students who participate in transition planning and, as a result, demonstrate higher motivation, engagement, and leadership. However, research suggests that the instructional planning for students receiving special education services still fails to meet the mark in areas of relevance, quality, and preparedness. Without IEP instruction, students reported lacking a clear understanding of the purpose of the meeting or their role in the process. Moreover, students felt their voices were not heard when they did contribute to meetings. These findings provide evidence of the significant gap between students with and without disabilities as they transition into areas of adult independence (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010; Childres & Chambers, 2005; Martin et al., 2004). Mason et al. (2002) reiterated the concern for improvement in education, training, employment, and independent living for students with disabilities once they complete high school. Hence, the absence of support often results in students entering post-school life experiencing difficulties integrating into their local communities. When working with students with ASD, Fayette and Bond (2018) concluded that there must be an individualized approach to support ASD youth

given the diversity of their individual needs. This approach must be collaborative and include parents, guardians, general and special education teachers, other staff involved in the student's life and, most importantly, the students.

The literature reviewed can serve as a starting point for school administrators, and general and special education teachers on IEP teams. Educators who seek to learn new ways of supporting students must develop strategies to reach all learners so that students can effectively articulate their interests and work with teams to learn how to apply their interests in school and in the community. Since students with ASD possess unique characteristics, an educator's focus on providing the necessary approaches needed for students to prepare, participate, and lead their IEP meetings will serve students well. Research indicates that when this happens, there is an increase in a student's self-determination, which transfers to other areas of their lives.

Chapter Three

The IEP operates as the vehicle for schools to develop, guide, and implement educational programming for a student with special needs. Moreover, when educators and IEP teams allow the student to be at the center of the planning, student engagement and the development of important life skills emerge. Some students with ASD display difficulty with communication and anxiety, which can impede their ability to participate in groups (Elias et al., 2017). Research also indicated that some students with ASD who attended and were involved in their IEP meetings expressed themselves more, demonstrated increased engagement in conversations about post-school plans, and spent more time in the general education setting (Findley et al., 2021; Fyock, 2020; Griffin et al., 2014; IDEA, 2004).

A gap in research exists regarding students involved in IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment. Through this study, the researcher sought to capture the stories of high school seniors with ASD who engaged in IEP meetings in a virtual setting. This chapter provides information regarding the research design, setting, protocols, ethical considerations, and data analysis. This study used qualitative methodology. Researchers define qualitative research as reporting on how individuals talk about and describe events in relation to how they view the world around them (Creswell, 2016).

Worldview

Through this study, the researcher sought to gain a deeper understanding and uncover information about the experiences of high school seniors with ASD and their involvement in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment. Therefore, the study design employed a constructivist worldview. Creswell and Creswell (2018)

identified a constructivist worldview as one in which individuals develop subjective meaning from their life experiences. Researchers are then tasked with taking the views of the individuals and make meaning of their perceptions, essentially retelling the story. This requires careful and thoughtful listening on the part of the researcher.

The notion of thoughtful listening is particularly crucial in the context of this study as the literature emphasizes the challenges encountered by students with ASD in terms of communication and socialization. Furthermore, thoughtful listening requires the researcher to recognize their own biases based on their personal, cultural, and historical experiences. A constructivist lens fits naturally with a qualitative study. Research documents qualitative research as a method that allows individuals to talk about and describe events based on the world around them. Moreover, qualitative research seeks to explore how individuals assign meaning to these life events, particularly if they involve perspectives attributed to social injustices or a human problem.

Lastly, qualitative research is a vehicle that allows the voices of marginalized communities who are seldom heard *to be heard*. (Creswell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). One of those underrepresented communities is students with ASD. Research indicates that IEP teams may not include students with ASD as active participants in planning, expressing their desires and interests, and giving input to their future goals for post-secondary activities. This becomes a missed opportunity for their voices to be heard and valued (Hagner et al., 2014). Therefore, it is the goal of this study to capture their voices and stories.

Narrative Inquiry

Through a constructivist lens, the researcher chose one of the oldest forms of telling stories about the experiences of people through narrative inquiry. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that narratives help us share our daily lives with others: "The power of narrative is not so much that it is *about* life but that that it interacts *in* life" (p. 34). The stories that emerge from these narratives serve as a meaningful source of data collection in qualitative research. The researcher is tasked with analyzing the individual's first-person accounts of their experiences.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) further identified three methodological approaches associated with narrative inquiry. The first is biographical, in which the researcher analyzes the story based on certain influences in the participant's lives, particularly human connections. The second is psychological, which concentrates on thoughts and motivation and how individuals arrive at certain conclusions regarding their experiences. The third is linguistic, focusing on the spoken text, tone, and volume of the speaker's voice. All three methodological approaches in narrative inquiry impacted this study.

As high school seniors with ASD participated in interviews and their IEP meetings, they relied on the relationships built between teachers and school administrators, and the support received from their families. The objective was for the researcher to tell each participant's story. Lastly, Creswell and Creswell (2018) added that in the end, narrative research integrates the perspectives of both the participant and the researcher. Essentially, through the process of narrative inquiry, the story is coauthored by the interviewer and the interviewee.

Theoretical Framework

The self-determination theory (SDT) intersected with both this study's worldview and the narrative inquiry approach. As mentioned in the literature review, Deci et al. (2013) identified competency, autonomy, and relatedness as three tenets of the SDT framework that are basic needs of every human being. The feelings of success or failure, the desire to be in control of our lives, and the need to feel connected to a larger community can all be captured in the stories that participants communicate in their reflections of the events that have occurred in their lives.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Wagner et al. (2012) concluded that despite the passage and amendments of IDEA requiring that students with disabilities ages 14 years and older be invited to their IEP meetings, school districts have done little more than meet this bare minimum requirement. Simply inviting a student to their IEP meeting does not mean that they will attend, nor does it mean that they will participate. Hagner et al. (2014) focused on self-advocacy and self-determination while investigating planning for students with ASD who benefit from a more naturalistic method, based on learning styles, for introducing and preparing them to participate in the IEP process. Again, given that there is little to no research on secondary students with disabilities participating in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of high school seniors with ASD who are involved in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment. The following research question guided this inquiry: How do high school seniors with ASD perceive their involvement in IEP meetings within a cyber charter school environment?

Research Setting

The researcher selected Works Cyber Charter School (WCCS), located in the country's Mid-Atlantic region, because it is a K-12 public cyber charter school. There is a gap in the research regarding students with disabilities, specifically secondary students with ASD, participating in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment. WCCS consists of three elementary schools, each school serving students in grades K-5. Similarly, there are three middle schools, each school serving students in grades 6-8. There are also four high schools, each high school serving students in grades 9-12. The enrollment of WCCS exceeds 24,000 students. More than 7,200 students are classified according to the 13 disabilities listed under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and receive special education services. Of those, more than 2,400 are secondary students with disabilities, almost 900 are K-12 students with ASD, approximately 400 are secondary students with ASD, and a little over 150 are seniors with ASD who receive itinerant level services in the learning support program. Approximately 51.7% of the students are female, 48.3% are male, 56.5% are White, 16.8% are African American, 17.8% are Hispanic, .33% are American Indian/Alaskan Native, .92% are Asian, .24% are Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 7.3% are multiracial. Regarding free and reduced meals, WCCS reported that 58% of families were eligible under this designation. In the 2021-2022 school year, WCCS experienced a 58.6% four-year cohort graduation rate and a 65.5% five-year cohort graduation rate. WCCS employs more than 1,400 teachers; a little over 350 are special education teachers, including special education teachers who are on assignment. Special education teachers are overseen by supervisors of special education.

Selection of Participants

The researcher used purposeful sampling to select participants for this study. The sampling was based on a classification of ASD (one of the 13 disabilities identified by IDEA) as determined by a certified school psychologist and a psychoeducational evaluation. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) reported that researchers who want to discover, understand, and gain insight must use their judgement to determine the best population for obtaining this information. In this case, a purposeful convenience sample, described by Galvan and Galvan (2017) as participants who are readily available to the researcher, was the appropriate method, However, researchers are cautioned that although convenience sampling can save time and effort, it can also come at the expense of providing sufficient information and credibility (Creswell, 2016, Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It is worth noting that although purposeful convenience sampling was used for this study, it was an especially good choice because WCCS prides itself on being a school district that has served students in a cyber environment for close to two decades and continues to raise the standards and expectations for school staff to meet the needs of an increasingly growing population of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the school's initiative to prepare students to participate and lead their IEP meetings serves as a springboard for strong transition planning recommended in the literature.

WCCS's approach to encouraging student participation follows the SDT that Niemiec and Ryan (2009) ascertained as a model that helps educators to be laser focused on students' natural curiosity and their love of learning. WCCS acknowledges that what is revealed from a student's thirst for knowledge, early in their educational career, is the catalyst for self-advocating throughout their lives. WCCS utilizes the IEPW special

education management software. The software can filter information to generate customized reports. For example, it was used to identify special education teachers serving as case managers for high school seniors with ASD who were receiving itinerant-level services in the learning support program. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) referred to this as criterion-based selection in which the researcher determines attributes of the participant sample that are essential and then locates those individuals who meet the criteria. Reports produced from the IEP software were generated by an IEPW software specialist and provided to the researcher who then asked the identified case managers to recommend potential students for the study. Acquiring these reports was a crucial first step in the data collection process; it set the stage for a series of data collection procedures that followed. The researcher was thoughtful in making sure that each step in this multi-step process was completed with the highest level of care and concern for this protected class of participants.

After approvals from the university's institutional review board and the school district were obtained, the researcher began the recruitment process by first submitting letters of interest with student criteria to 15 WCCS special education teachers who served as case managers for 24 high school seniors with ASD who received itinerant level services in the learning support program. This list was generated by an IEPW software specialist. After receiving the letters, all 15 case managers responded by either asking clarifying questions to better determine if any of their seniors met the criteria for the study or indicating they had no students who met the criteria. Criteria were based on the seniors' ability to (a) have a basic understanding of their disability; (b) verbally exchange information in a one-to-one setting; (c) communicate their strengths, needs, interests,

preferences, and talents; (d) participate in their IEP meeting by articulating their understanding of their goals developed by the team and how they believed the recommended supports will help them be successful; (e) ask questions; and (f) have an IEP meeting in the spring of 2023 prior to graduation. Case managers used data from the *present levels of academic, behavior, and functional performance* section of each student's most recent IEP (as well as teacher observation and other documents) to recommend participants who met the selection criteria.

Once the researcher answered the clarifying questions, four case manager responded with interest, and each was provided with a consent form to participate. The researcher received signed consent forms from all four case managers. As required by the Shippensburg University IRB, contact information for potential participants and their family members was not shared with the researcher until the participants and family member communicated a willingness to potentially participate in the study along with their case manager. The case managers submitted the names of seven students to the researcher. These names produced the potential pool of participants. Before sending out the consent forms, the researcher spoke with each of the potential participants and their parents to explain the study and address any questions that the case manager was not able to answer. After speaking with students and parents, and having a follow-up conversation with the case managers, the researcher determined that three of the students did not meet all of the criteria for the study. Therefore, those three students were not eligible to be considered. The parent of the fourth student indicated they would let the researcher know if they wanted to participate; however, they never contacted the researcher.

After the remaining three potential participants and their parents agreed to review the consent and assent forms, the researcher sent both documents to the parents. After the signed consent and assent forms were returned to the researcher, the participants were confirmed. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that though the sample sizes may vary in qualitative research, a sample size of three to ten participants is sufficient for a qualitative study. Further, because narrative inquiry focuses on exploring identity through storytelling, this sample size, while small, allowed for a deep dive into the lived experiences of each of the three participants. Table 1 shows the demographic information for each participant along with the pseudonyms chosen by the students.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Pseudonym	Grade	Age	Gender	Race	Years@WCCS
Bolt	12	18	M	African American	4
PickleBoy23	12	18	M	Caucasian	11
Tony Stark	12+	18	M	Caucasian	5

Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe generalizability as "applying results to a new setting, people or samples" (p. 198). As mentioned in Chapter One, transferability was present from the start of the study. Through narrative inquiry, a deeper exploration of each participant's story was revealed and transferability, which Terrell (2019) defines as the ability to apply the results of a study to other situations or individuals, naturally emerged. Educators and parents/guardians of students with ASD and other disabilities can determine how aspects of these participants' stories apply to their own situations.

Research Design and Data Collection Procedure

With participants established, the data collection process began. This study used a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry involves exploration into the identity of individuals (Clandinin et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This depth of research included an examination of participants' stories through document reviews, interviews, and observations. Creswell (2016) asserted that checking the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations can be achieved through triangulation. Creswell and Creswell (2018) built on this description by suggesting that evidence from various sources helps to shape a coherent justification for themes. Therefore, the use of data triangulation encompassing document reviews, interviews, and observations allowed the researcher to provide a thick description of the perceptions of three high school seniors with ASD who were involved in their IEP meetings.

Document Review

This document review followed what Merriam & Tisdell (2015) described as the biographical element to narrative inquiry in which the researcher analyzes the story based on certain influences in the participant's lives, particularly human connections. Creswell (2016) proposed four advantages of reviewing documents: the researchers can view the words of the participants, the documents can be accessed at the researcher's convenience, the data is a thoughtful compilation of the participant's work, and the participant's documents do not need to be transcribed. For this study, the archival data included but was not limited to the evaluation report (ER), reevaluation report (RR), IEP, notice of recommended educational placement (NOREP), a functional behavior assessment (FBA) and positive behavior support plan (PBSP) (if applicable), transition assessment surveys,

quarterly progress monitoring reports, and student portfolios. As a regional director of special education, the researcher had electronic access to the database that included these documents (and the ability to download and print them), with the exception of student classwork, project portfolios, and anecdotal records. Information from these sources were obtained electronically from each participant's case manager. Prior to reviewing any documents, the researcher sought permission from the participants and their parents.

The purpose of reviewing these documents was as follows: a review of the *evaluation or reevaluation report* informed the researcher of the background information of the physical condition, social or cultural background and adaptive behavior relevant to the student's disability and need for special education. This report described results of cognitive, academic, functional, behavior (if appropriate), transition, classroom, local, and state assessments. The report also provided input from the parents/guardians, results of observations by teachers and related services providers (if applicable), teacher and school psychologist recommendations based on the students' strengths and needs, and documentation of the identified disability.

The *IEP* included abbreviated summaries of each student's most recent *ER* or *RR* and informed the researcher of the present academic and functional levels; special considerations; current and projected grades; teacher observations; parent and student input; academic, behavior (if applicable), social, transition (post-secondary education and training, employment, independent living), and related service goals; specially designed instruction; and accommodations.

The *NOREP* confirmed the placement/program and provided evidence of how the team arrived at the decision. If a student's document contained an *FBA* and *PSPB*, it

informed the researcher of the assessments, completed by the behavior specialist, that were used to determine if interventions were needed to address specific behaviors. The FBA and PSBA also included the goals that were created to address how the student was supported by teachers, family, and other school personnel.

Results from questions answered in the *transition assessment surveys* added to the researcher's knowledge of each student's interests and preferences. Although there was a plethora of transition assessments, which can be individualized depending on a student's need, students in 9th grade typically complete the Career Clueless survey, 10th-grade students complete the Career Interest Assessment, 11th grade students complete the O*NET, and 12th grade students complete the Career Clusters Assessment.

A review of *quarterly progress monitoring reports* informed the researcher of the progress each student made towards IEP goals at the end of each marking period. Student classwork was examined to inform the researcher of independent work that the student completed. Reflections on these documents supported the triangulation of data before, during, and after the student interviews and observations. Based on the review of the document, the researcher created a one-page profile of each participant that documented evidence of the participant's present levels and supported how the criteria were met. These profiles were developed into the biographical narratives in Chapter Four.

Interviews

Interviews with the participants served as the second measurement tool for the study. According to Seidman (2019), interviewing allows the researcher an avenue of inquiry to gain a better understanding of the experiences of individuals. Specifically, the researcher engaged in narrative inquiry interviewing which Merriam and Tisdell (2015)

defined as focusing on the meaning that the participants make of their lived experiences. This aligns with the psychological element of narrative inquiry. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argued that the psychological element focuses on the participants' thoughts and how they arrive at certain conclusions regarding their experiences. Furthermore, using open-ended questions allowed the researcher to go deeper into exploring the participant's responses. The participant interviews were conducted individually. Creswell (2016) proposed one-to-one interviews when the researcher wants to acquire the personal perspectives of the participants who may not be willing to disclose information in a group setting. The purpose of the one-to-one interviews were to ascertain the perceptions of students regarding their involvement in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher conducted two virtual interviews, one before the participant's IEP meeting and one following the IEP meeting. Since students attend a cyber school and experience education virtually, it was a natural alignment for the interviews to also be conducted virtually. Seidman (2019) suggested that when researchers are capturing the meaning of people's experiences, a three-interview series is recommended, as one meeting with the participants will not adequately capture the context of the lived experiences. The annual IEP meeting is typically scheduled on a date/time that is convenient for the family and the school; therefore, requesting two interviews proved less of an imposition on the participants and parent/guardian schedules than three interviews.

Each interview consisted of no more than ten open ended questions intended to capture the participant's individual perceptions regarding their IEP involvement. Each

participant and their parent or guardian were contacted to secure a convenient time to conduct the interview. The researcher conducted rapport building activities with each participant and their parent or guardian prior to the first interview. One contact occurred face to face during a home visit, a second contact occurred via Zoom with the participant's case manager, and a third contact was conducted over the telephone. It was necessary for the researcher to establish a rapport with the participants, as socialization is one of the challenges for students with ASD (Hagner et al., 2014). Furthermore, Seidman (2019) explains that taking time to make contact before the study begins implicitly tells the participants, "You are important. I take you seriously" (p. 53).

The student interview protocols consisted of a series of steps to guide the interview process (Appendix A and B). The researcher also offered the participants the option of having the interview questions placed in the chat to allow more time to reflect on the question before responding. At WCCS, this is a common practice that is afforded to students. The questions for the first interview (Appendix A) focused on developing rapport with the participants, learning their background, getting to know them, and gaining an understanding of their school life. The researcher inquired about the details of their school experience, including IEP meetings, and the events that led up to the IEP meeting. The researcher intentionally allowed space for the participants to share their interests and stories of family interactions. Listening and waiting to pose the next question in the protocol were tools used to uncover the perspectives of each participant. The second interview (Appendix B) consisted of questions related to the participant's experiences and reflections during their IEP meeting and the meaning that they attributed to the answers given in the first interviews.

Each interview set contained no more than ten questions and some interviews lasted more than 50 minutes. Although Creswell (2016) proposed that short interviews can yield more information after transcription, Clandinin (2018) emphasized that in narrative inquiry, time is required to build relationships while the researcher works alongside the participants to tell their stories. Each zoom interview was recorded, later transcribed using a transcription service, analyzed, and manually color coded. During the interviews, the researcher took brief notes and wrote down key quotations as they emerged. The researcher also paid close attention to each participant's voice, tone, and body language; worked to ensure a balance between taking notes and maintaining eye contact; and listened carefully as each interviewee spoke.

Observations

The third data collection tool for the study was virtual observations of the participants in their IEP meetings. Creswell (2016) stated that observations can be used as a backup for interviewing especially if participants are not able to fully express themselves in an interview. Observations can produce firsthand information that may not be revealed during the review of documents or interviews; they allow the researcher to compare themes and codes generated from the interviews. Likewise, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that the third element of narrative inquiry, linguistics, focuses on the spoken text, tone, and volume of the speaker's voice.

During each observation, the researcher used a protocol (Appendix C) to record information that occurred in real time. The protocol included descriptive notes to record actual events and reflective notes to record any new information the researcher learned about the event. Embedded in the descriptive notes table was a checklist to determine if

the participants accomplished specific tasks. The creation of this checklist was guided by the Royer (2017) study which examined how effective the *MY IEP* Curriculum was in supporting students to direct their individualized programs. Like the interview, and given the existing gap in the research regarding students participating in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment, one of the items on the checklist was designed to address the participant's virtual experience (See Appendix C). The IEP observations occurred during the participant's annual IEP meeting. Therefore, it was important that the timing of the two interviews and observation was aligned.

Data Analysis

The triangulation of data included document reviews, interviews, and observations. Again, the biographical, psychological, and linguistic methods of narrative inquiry served as a guide during data analysis, which involved open coding. Creswell (2016) described the process of coding as making sense of raw text, while Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that coding is a method of using shorthand to identify specific pieces for easy accessibility later. The participants' information was coded for anonymity. Codes can be represented by numbers, letters, colors etc. that symbolically serve as pieces of data. The codes in this study were represented by colors. As the coding of the data builds from all three sources, themes and subthemes will emerge. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) emphasized that generating themes is one method used to analyze narrative research. As themes and sub-themes are revealed, the researcher determines which themes remain solid and which become less viable. Further, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested that beginning with many themes is acceptable; however, the researcher

should move to decreasing the number of themes, a practice that allows greater ease in communicating the findings in the narrative.

With the above description in mind, the researcher followed six steps suggested by Creswell (2016) for examining the raw data and inductive coding:

- Set up the transcript in a manner that will allow for easy coding.
- Read and reread through all the text to ascertain a general sense of its content.
- Begin coding the in vivo text.
- Group the codes to eliminate overlap and repeats.
- Using the inductive analysis lens, look for patterns, themes and sub themes across the codes and create a conceptual map.
- Generate a narrative that connects the themes and sub themes.

The primary goal was to capture the authentic voices of the participants which Creswell (2016) described as in vivo language. Therefore, given the constructivist and narrative inquiry approach for this study, and to address the research question, inductive reasoning served as a natural coding process. Creswell (2016) emphasized that the buildup of codes results from working with the raw data first.

The researcher conducted three rounds of what Creswell (2016) referred to as the lean coding process, which generates smaller versus larger numbers of codes in the analysis processes. This also assisted with developing diverse evidence for themes which were generated from the perspective of each participant's voice. Lean coding was used on the transcription of the two interviews and the observation notes. Subsequently, in vivo language used the actual words of the participants. This method of code labeling required the researcher to perform continuous reviews of the transcripts to ascertain missed

language from the participants that added value to the codes and themes. Creswell (2016) argued, “The best code label would be in the exact words of the participants” (p. 64). These in vivo codes provided themes that resonated with the participants.

To further address the research question, the researcher implemented a deductive analysis of the interview transcripts and the IEP observations. Creswell (2016) describes this as a top-down system where the researcher engages in a process of using an existing theory and aligning the participants words or actions based on the theory or philosophy. Given this approach, the researcher reviewed the interview transcripts and observation reflection notes again using themes based on the SDT, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Lastly, a second coder, who is an alumna of the Millersville/Shippensburg Ed.D. program and CITI certified, provided input regarding the researcher’s application of the codes and themes. The second coder, who signed a confidentiality agreement, had access to transcripts from the two interviews and the observation notes. The second coder asked to review Chapter One of the study for context. Based on the documents provided, this individual conducted a separate round of coding. Through a consensual coding process, which Creswell (2016) describes as “a procedural approach to discuss and resolve coding questions and differences that arise” (p. 198), the researcher and second coder compared results and agreed on the codes and themes. The second coder’s input helped to inform the researcher’s analysis as it provided evidence of what the second coder viewed as similarities, frequency of participants’ comments, causation, and meanings captured from observation notes.

Member Checking

Regarding trustworthiness and credibility, Seidman (2019) asserted that sharing the interview transcripts with the participants helps to achieve the goal of member checking. It is also an important step in ruling out the possibility of misrepresenting the perspectives of the participants and serves as a vehicle to identify the researcher's biases or misunderstandings. Therefore, after each interview, participants received copies of the transcripts via email with a request for feedback if deemed necessary. The purpose was to determine if mistakes were made based on the transcripts. Additionally, if the participants believed additional insights from the interviews were needed, it would be brought to the researcher's attention. Two participants had no changes and the third participant never responded, even though several attempts were made by the researcher.

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

The researcher submitted a full proposal to the institutional review board (IRB) to gain permission to begin the study. Once IRB and school approval was secured, the researcher obtained signed consent and assent forms from the participants and parents.

To ensure confidentiality throughout the research process, the researcher used pseudonyms for the setting and the participants. No real names were revealed. It is important to note that the participants chose their own pseudonyms. All communication with the participants took place via the researcher's personal email on a personal laptop. This ensured that none of the participants' information regarding the study was captured on a WCCS laptop which is monitored by the school. The recorded Zoom interviews were conducted on the researcher's personal laptop and transcripts were saved on a dedicated flash drive. The personal laptop was password protected and programmed to

close after five minutes of nonuse. Both laptop and flash drive remained secure in a location to which only the research had access. Although the observation notes included the names of the participants, once the information was transferred to the results, the identities of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms. All observation notes were also saved on the study's dedicated flash drive. Any hard copies of notes were held in a secure location. The information from the participants' records review also included pseudonyms.

Power Dynamic and the Role of the Researcher

The researcher acknowledges that a potential power dynamic existed in the process of the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described the term *backyard research* to describe researcher influences that occur as they study their own setting. As previously stated, the researcher served as one of the directors of special education where the study was conducted. Although the researcher did not supervise the special education teachers/case managers (who were active in the selection of the participants) or assign grades to the participants (by virtue of the researcher's position), the special education teachers/case managers may have felt that agreeing or not agreeing with the researcher's request to participate could influence their performance evaluation or their chances for a future promotion. Likewise, the student participants may have also experienced an imbalance of power. Although not the teacher of record for any of the high school seniors, the researcher was an unfamiliar adult to the students. As a result, students may have perceived a connection between their participation and their grades. With that in mind, the researcher reinforced the protocols, explained the purpose of the study with the option of stopping at any time, and reminded participants of the opportunity to review the

transcripts. Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlighted the importance of demonstrating how the data will be protected so as not to place the participants at risk.

While the power dynamic was established, the narrative inquiry approach placed the researcher in a unique position to work alongside the participant in what Clandinin (2018) described as a method to inquire into the storied experiences of the individuals. The unique position of the researcher is primarily based on the researcher's background knowledge and experience as a special education teacher, coordinator, and director. These three roles required the researcher to continuously engage with students and their families, developing relationships over time that increased the impact of the home and school partnership. The researcher's work with secondary students with ASD focused on preparing them for transition to work by identifying programs and providers offering post-secondary training. Moreover, having served as a local education agency (LEA) representative in many IEP meetings, the researcher contributed to decisions made to improve the special education programming of students with disabilities. Given the nature of such collaboration, a decrease in the power dynamic unfolded throughout the data collection process. In the end, the researcher's perspective was used to inform the study; however, through the use of the in vivo method of coding, care was taken to ensure that the researcher's perspective did not reduce the participants' voices.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology used in this study. Chandroo et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of teachers encouraging students with ASD to attend their IEP meetings, noting that attendance alone is not enough, and educators should empower students with ASD to take an active role. The researcher's

goal for this study was to tell the story of participants' experiences regarding their involvement in their IEP meetings. In conducting this study, the researcher captured the authentic accounts of the participants, uplifting their voices in the process of sharing their stories. The next chapter will present the study's findings from analysis of the document reviews, interviews, and observations.

Chapter Four

Research supports favorable post-school outcomes when students with disabilities participate in their IEP meetings (Kelley et al., 2011; Martin, 2014). However, for students with ASD, participation poses an even greater challenge because of communication, anxiety and social difficulties related to engaging in a group setting (Hagner et al., 2014). The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of high school seniors with ASD about their involvement in their IEP meetings in a cyber charter school environment. To reveal the stories that emerged from the participants' lived experiences at WCCS, the researcher used narrative inquiry, a qualitative methodology. Seidman (2019) concluded that contact before the interview builds a foundation for the interview relationship. Therefore, the researcher conducted rapport-building meetings with each participant and their parent or guardian. The researcher discovered that these meetings provided context to the stories and the observations. In addition, they strengthened the researcher-participant connection, promoted deeper exploration, and enabled the researcher to authentically capture the voices of the participants.

Before examining the findings of this study, it is necessary to establish rich biographical portrayals of the participants. These biographical descriptions offer a window into the identity of each participant. Narrative inquiry begins with a biographical focus on the participants to build thick and rich descriptions. Within the descriptions, the researcher highlighted areas the participants focused on as they detailed their experiences. Bolt's love of music and displays of affection towards animals, PickleBoy23's passion for nature, and Tony Stark's appreciation for movies and video games demonstrated what Grove et al. (2016) referred to as special interests that individuals with ASD possesses.

These interests can remain important throughout their lives. It was imperative for the researcher to recognize the attention these students dedicated to their areas of interest as it enhanced understanding of how the world is seen by each participant. Again, it is important to note that the participants chose their own pseudonyms based on connections to personal areas of their lives.

The researcher developed the following section based on the rapport-meetings, document reviews, interviews, and observations of the IEP meetings. Specifically, when reviewing the documents, the researcher looked at the evaluation or reevaluation report first. This report summarized the results of administered assessments which determined the participant's eligibility to receive special education services under IDEA. Therefore, the researcher used this document to identify the specific learning, physical, or emotional disability of the participant. The second document reviewed was the IEP. Based on the evaluation/reevaluation report, this is the planning document used by the IEP team to describe the participant's present level of programming and build the IEP goals and objectives. This researcher used the IEP to identify academic, functional, or behavioral needs. The NOREP was the third document reviewed. This document identified the participant's program and level of services. Parents must provide authorization on the NOREP for services to begin. Using these documents, the researcher crafted the descriptions below. Meet the participants.

Biographical Description of Participants

Bolt

Bolt is an 18-year-old African American male who has been a student at WCCS for the past four years. Bolt was identified with a primary disability of autism and has

demonstrated a need in the areas of academics and coping skills. Bolt participates in the itinerant learning support program and is a regular and active member of a social skills support group. He resides at home with his mother but also receives support from his father, stepmother, maternal grandmother, and older sister. Due to technological challenges, the researcher visited the family home and obtained the required signed assent and consent forms in person. This presented a brief opportunity to observe Bolt in a natural environment surrounded by his mother and maternal grandmother.

At this meeting, Bolt first expressed his love of his pets and animals overall. Bolt's cat sat next to the researcher, which presented moments of distress due to the researcher's fear of cats. Observing the discomfort, Bolt explained that the cat normally sat where the researcher was seated. Learning this information, the researcher relocated to another area of the sofa. Attempting to lessen the researcher's fear, Bolt picked up the cat and stroked her. He explained the cat's genealogy, highlighted Bolt's traits, and shared how the name was decided. This presented an opportunity for Bolt to discuss the behaviors of some of the animals in his neighborhood, particularly a dog that lived across the street.

As the researcher presented the assent form, Bolt asked if the form could be read to him, and the researcher obliged. Bolt made eye contact with the researcher as each section was read. He had no questions. When asked if he wanted to participate in the study, Bolt responded, "Yes." As the researcher was leaving, Bolt's mother requested that he help his grandmother complete a task. As if accustomed to these requests, Bolt listened carefully to his mother, as evidenced by his eye contact, while she gave step-by-step directions for the task. He then responded with "OK" after the directions were given.

Bolt's careful listening would also be observed by the researcher during the interviews and IEP observation.

During the first interview, Bolt interacted with his young niece and intermittently communicated with her by responding to her inquiries. His older sister was also in the home during the first interview, and Bolt communicated with her periodically as well. During the interview, Bolt's mother revealed that prior to attending WCCS, Bolt experienced a number of challenging behavioral episodes in elementary and middle school. According to his mother, these behaviors were significantly reduced after he entered WCCS for high school. During the IEP meeting, she expressed her appreciation to WCCS for the regular communication and felt he received stronger IEPs than in previous schools. Particularly during Bolt's senior year, his mom observed that he finally realized what he needed to do regarding his schoolwork. She still remains concerned as she recognizes that the social/emotional side of Bolt is not always stable. Although she understands this about him, she expressed concern that his future employers may not. She believes that having a job coach will be a support for Bolt in this area.

During the second interview, Bolt shared his enjoyment of listening to music and indicated Michael Jackson was one of his favorite singers. He asked if the researcher had a favorite Michael Jackson song. When the researcher responded with "Human Nature," Bolt indicated he was not familiar with the song. The researcher played the song and Bolt smiled and responded, "I like it." He placed his favorite Michael Jackson songs in the chat, as well as his mother's, sister's, and grandmother's favorites. Bolt also reiterated his love for animals. He described the various pets that he cared for over the years, most recently a dog, a cat, and a lizard, which he named after a video game. More

significantly, Bolt identified various types of exotic and prehistoric animals. He appeared to take pride in himself when others took an interest in hearing him talk about unfamiliar creatures. The volume of his voice increased and he smiled. With this in mind, it is not surprising that, ultimately, Bolt desires a job that involved working with animals.

According to his mother, Bolt's family was surprised when he expressed a last-minute interest to attend the senior prom because of the panic attacks he might experience when around people. Bolt also decided to attend the WCCS graduation. There was the same speculation regarding how he would respond to attending a graduation in a large venue with many people. During the school year, he attended at least one job fair offered by a local university for individuals with autism and other disabilities. Currently, Bolt did not elect to pursue post-secondary education but intended to enter the workforce.

PickleBoy23

PickleBoy23 is an 18-year-old Caucasian male and has been a student at WCCS for l1 years. He is an only child who resides at home with his mother and father. His mother has played a significant role in his education. She sat next to PickleBoy23 throughout each interview and during the IEP meeting. She often clarified comments or repeated questions that he may not have understood. PickleBoy23 was identified with a primary disability of autism and a secondary disability of speech and language impairment for which he received individual and group therapy. PickleBoy23 demonstrated a need in the areas of academics and coping skills, participates in the itinerant learning support program. and is a regular and active member of a social skills support group. Before the interviews officially began, PickleBoy23 and his mother agreed to having the researcher attend two one-to-one sessions with his case manager as a

way of an informal introduction. The researcher briefly attended both one-to-one sessions. After seeing the researcher appear on Zoom for the first time, PickleBoy23 remembered that his mother told him the researcher would be joining them. He smiled, asked a general question about the purpose of the study, and responded “Yes” after his mother asked him if he understood. During the researcher’s second appearance on Zoom with the case manager, PickleBoy23 was eager to show the science project he created around the planets. He was smiling as he displayed it. This was the researcher’s first glimpse into his love of math and science.

During the interview, PickleBoy23’s mother explained that he experienced a challenging first two years of his education (kindergarten and first grade) before being identified with autism. She also reported that his first-grade teacher stated she did not believe in autism and, at the start of his second-grade year, that teacher indicated she did not follow IEPs. PickleBoy23’s mother elaborated on how difficult these experiences were for the entire family. This resulted in PickleBoy23’s enrollment at WCCS in his second-grade year. His parents saw a significant improvement in his performance over the years.

At both interviews, PickleBoy23 reiterated that his two favorite subjects were math and science. During the IEP meeting, PickleBoy23’s case manager shared that he earned an almost 100% average in his earth science and statistics classes, and he completed both end-of-year projects with impressive averages. PickleBoy23 expressed a love of nature. Specifically, he described how he would like to develop systems to clean up pollution. PickleBoy23 expressed an interest in college for the first time this year, completing a college application to fulfill the ACT158 graduation pathway requirement.

He articulated his excitement in applying for college and was thrilled to learn that he was accepted to LIFE University for the fall. He also expressed enthusiasm after learning that the individual he interviewed for his final statistics project was also a professor at LIFE University. PickleBoy23 and his mother hoped that this would be an opportunity to demonstrate his love of math to the professor. Although he had not settled on a major, he expressed that he wanted his focus to involve math and science. He and his mother were in conversations with the university to discuss his disability and determine the support available to him once he enrolled. He had not confirmed whether he would live on campus or participate in a hybrid format.

During the observation, PickleBoy 23's mother communicated that he deserved an award for perfect attendance. She also expressed that because PickleBoy23 had been a student at WCCS for 11 years, he would often help the new teachers. During the second interview, PickleBoy23 expressed his enjoyment of spending time outdoors with his family. He described looking forward to going kayaking this summer. His mother helped him to describe kayaking. He smiled as he talked about how much he enjoyed participating every year. He was also looking forward to spending time in the park this summer to allow further exploration of his love of nature.

Tony Stark

Tony Stark is a 19-year-old Caucasian male and has been a student at WCCS for almost five years. Tony Stark was identified with a primary disability of autism, secondary disability of other health impairment, and a tertiary disability of visual health impairment. He demonstrated a need in the areas of academics and coping skills, participates in the itinerant learning support program, and is a regular and active member

of a social skills support group. Last school year, Tony Stark and his siblings experienced the loss of their mother whose health had deteriorated after an illness. Although Tony Stark's father is in his life, his older brother became his legal guardian after his mother passed.

This school year, Tony Stark experienced a second devastating loss after he, his older brother, and his young nephew became homeless. The three of them moved multiple times (even out of state) during the second half of the school year, residing with family, friends, and even living in a car at one point. The counseling and student services departments at WCCS were heavily involved with supporting the family with resources to help them gain access to temporary shelter. There were moments of poor or no Wi-Fi reception which greatly impacted Tony Stark's ability to participate in his virtual classes, leading to a number of absences and overdue assignments. Again, the Office of Student and Family Services moved swiftly to work with the family by identifying means to mitigate these circumstances and develop a plan for Tony Stark to get caught up on his assignments.

Before officially beginning the interviews, the researcher had two telephone conversations with Tony Stark and his brother to ensure they would have access to technology to participate on Zoom video calls. These conversations allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the severe nature and impact the two major life events have had on the family, especially Tony Stark. The case manager expressed that Tony Stark's anxiety was at an all-time high due to the housing insecurity. His guardian confirmed this as well during the interviews and emphasized that Tony Stark's high anxiety level has impacted his mental and physical health as well. When Tony Stark

described how ASD influenced his life, he used examples of the loss of his mother and his homelessness to illustrate his points.

Admirably, despite the difficult circumstances of housing insecurity, limited access to a phone, and (at times) unstable internet connections, Tony Stark and his brother attended both interviews from a hotel room and the IEP meeting from their sister's home. On both occasions, they were on time and experienced little to no technological interruptions. When there was no access to phones, they would contact the researcher through family members to confirm the interview times and the Zoom link.

During both interviews, Tony Stark described sharing his interest in the arts, particularly movies, music, and video games. He enjoyed sharing his life with others. When responding to many of the answers to the interview questions, he used analogies to Disney or other movies, compared his favorite actors to himself, or when referencing others, quoted famous one-liners to emphasize points in a discussion. In addition, he intermittently interjected his love for vintage video games during discussions. Tony Stark demonstrated this same behavior during the IEP meeting. The more comfortable he felt as the meeting progressed, the more elaborate language he used. As a 12th-grade student,

Tony Stark has accrued the required credits to graduate with the class of 2023. However, he exercised his right to remain in school for one more year to focus on his transition goals. He plans to complete elective courses and focus heavily on work-related skills, including internship opportunities that best matched his interests, while receiving job-coaching assistance. Tony Stark plans to graduate with the class of 2024. During the IEP meeting, Tony Stark's guardian announced that permanent housing was secured. This move provides a little more stability, allowing him to focus on school for the

remainder of the current school year and next year. Nevertheless, the adjustment has presented a challenge for the family.

Tony Stark's brother expressed his appreciation for the support that WCCS has given to the family during their displacement and particularly the support shown to Tony Stark throughout his time at WCCS. During the second interview, both Tony Stark and his guardian appeared relieved that permanent housing was forthcoming as both had smiles on their faces and the pitch and volume of their voices increased. When the guardian expressed that relocating out of state as a long-term goal, Tony Stark exhibited a drastic change in tone of voice, yelling that he would not be relocating with his brother. This led to a verbal back and forth, with his guardian informing him that there was no family with whom he could reside within PA. Surprisingly, Tony Stark appeared to deescalate himself by changing the subject to his girlfriend.

The challenges that Tony Stark and his guardian experienced were exacerbated by the loss of their mother and ultimately their home. Nevertheless, both demonstrated resilience, as evidenced by their attendance, participation, and a willingness to accept support.

Inductive Analysis

The primary goal of this study was to capture the authentic voices of the participants. The responses from the interviews and observations reflected the psychological (thoughts and motivation) and linguistic (what was said and how it was said) elements associated with the narrative inquiry approach. Triangulation of data included document reviews, two interviews (pre and post IEP meeting), and an observation during the IEP meetings for each participant. Based on analysis of the

triangulation of data, the researcher used the inductive coding process to generate themes from the participant's voices connected to the research question.

To address the research question, in vivo codes were used to produce the four themes that are based on the authentic voices of the participants (Creswell, 2016). The researcher accomplished this goal by using inductive analysis as a natural coding process that started with conducting multiple rounds of reviewing raw data and using lean coding to generate smaller numbers of codes in the analysis process (Creswell, 2016). Two interview transcripts, observations, and reflection notes all revealed opportunities for diverse themes to surface. Once the four themes emerged through the lens of what Clandinin et al. (2016) described as narrative inquiry, the researcher presented the experiences of the three participants. With that in mind, the four themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: "It's There, but It's Not There."

The first theme originated from one participant specifically saying, "It's there but it's not there." The "it" referred to autism, a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder. Although the traits may not always be visible to others, all three participants acknowledged being aware of their disabilities. Further, each participant recognized their disability affected interactions with others or prevented them from completing a task:

Bolt: "It's there, but it's not there, is the way to say it."

"Me talking in my head, having an inner monologue."

PickleBoy23: "I have a hard time paying attention and listening to others."

Tony Stark: "I have the tendency to forget stuff sometimes when I'm under pressure."

"My autism can drive people crazy."

"I don't think I'm able to relax."

During the first interview, when asked to talk about his autism, Bolt, in an almost reserved manner, expressed, "It doesn't really get in the way of most things. It's mild." And with emphasis, he repeated it again, "it's just mild." He went on to clarify what he meant by mild: "It's not really there most of the time." Bolt expressed that when "it's there, it's a lot of random questions popping in my head." But when it's not there, he's simply having a conversation with himself: "Me talking just in my head, having an inner monologue." It is noteworthy that Bolt's mother found it impressive that he used the term inner monologue.

All the participants demonstrated extended pause times in between interview questions, which could be attributed to feelings of nervousness that each participant experienced with their ASD. The frequency and duration of Bolt's pauses may have represented his discomfort in the social setting. Although the interview was virtual and Bolt was in his own home, Elias et al. (2017) reported that challenges with social interactions are common behaviors for students with ASD.

During the second interview, his pause time between questions seemed to be a little shorter than the first interview, which may have indicated an increase in his comfort level. While Bolt did not use the term *panic attacks* in his description of autism, his mother, during the IEP meeting, described Bolt's past experiences of nervousness and panic attacks. At one point during the IEP meeting, Bolt stepped away from the screen. When asked about his whereabouts, his mother indicated that he went to use the restroom. She explained that when Bolt gets nervous or starts something new, he will

need to use the restroom frequently. He returned to the IEP meeting seven minutes later. At another point during the meeting, Bolt picked up his dog, showed the team, and began giving the team details about the pet: “I don’t know how old she is. I give her food and water, take her for walks, and when I don’t walk her, I set up pads.” This engagement with the pet seemed to bring some emotional comfort to Bolt and appeared to ease the nervousness. Similar to Bolt’s presentation of his cat when the researcher visited the home, Bolt appeared comfortable when talking about animals.

During the first interview, when asked about his autism, PickleBoy23 provided a variety of different responses: “I have a nice face and I’m polite.” “And my teachers, peers, and friends … and I never called them any horrible names.” Eventually, he landed on something that he struggled with: “I have a hard time paying attention.” For both interviews, he was supported by his mother who often repeated questions for him or presented the information to him in a different way.

During the IEP meeting, PickleBoy23 would repeat the question out loud (appearing to ask himself the question) before he responded. His communication was sometimes hard to understand due to a slight stutter to his speech. He would try to make his communication as clear as possible. This is an area in which he received support from a speech therapist based on the secondary classification of speech and language impairment. PickleBoy23 used a fidget during the second interview to help him focus.

Tony Stark was eager to provide an explanation about this autism: “I have professor syndrome and Asperger’s syndrome.” He elaborated, “I have the tendency to forget stuff sometimes when I’m under pressure.” This became evident throughout the meeting as he would stop to ask his older brother (his guardian) questions. Some of these

questions were related to the interview and others were not. In a reflection on how his disability is perceived by others, Tony Stark expressed that “my autism drives people crazy.” In the background, there was agreement about that statement coming from the older brother, acknowledging that Tony Stark does not stop and often must be reminded to calm down, relax, and assess the situation. In an effort to explain how he feels unable to relax when something is bothering him, Tony Stark remarked, “Yeah, every human pipe, it’s kind of leaking my sweat pipes, my every pipe.” These feelings were particularly escalated when the familywas experiencing homelessness and dealing with the uncertainty of stable housing, but for Tony Stark, it was also the uneasiness of not knowing if he would be able to continue his education. He explained,

> Yeah, I think that part of the autism is just like, it is like that. I don’t know. I think the panic attacks and I don’t know. I have panic attacks and anxiety attacks. And then with the panic and panic attacks and the anxiety attacks and then with the depression, it kind of, I don’t know it’s a panic. A panic, depression, and anxiety attack.

A small but relevant indication of Tony Stark’s struggle to remain calm occurred during the IEP meeting when he had to relocate to the kitchen. Tony Stark replied with a hint of annoyance in his voice, “Why do I have to move out of the three blankets into the kitchen?” Despite this inconvenience, Tony Stark was able to settle himself down to proceed with the meeting. Tony Stark summed up these experiences with this: “Autism is no joke.”

Theme one, “It’s there, but it’s not there,*”* captured the perceptions of each participant’s interpretation and understanding of their disability and the impact it has on

their lives. Although Bolt felt that “it” was not there most of the time, during the interviews and observations, he exhibited behaviors consistent with what research describes as challenges for students with ASD, indicating that autism has some impact on his life. PickleBoy23 responded to some questions after receiving support from his mother. These acts of support, when the student lost focus and demonstrated an inability to pay attention, served as evidence that “it” is there. Tony Stark recognized his challenges with ASD and the impact it had on his educational and personal life. The next theme discusses each participant’s experiences with support, where the assistance comes from and its influence on their lives.

Theme 2: “Hey, I Need Help.”

For the second theme, during both interviews, all three participants used the words or phrases *requesting help*, *knowing how to ask for help*, and *requesting clarification* when it was needed. For students with ASD who experience challenges with understanding direction or paying attention, requesting help is a technique that could be practiced with the support of teachers and parents. Self-advocacy is an important communication skill needed for students with ASD to increase post-secondary success. Through this study, the researcher determined each participant’s ability to articulate their need for support from the individuals involved in their lives. Two participants communicated needing help during the IEP meeting. Within this theme, demonstrations of advocacy, ownership of education, the need to feel successful, and the importance of ensuring adult accountability and responsibility were all revealed.

Bolt: “Excuse me, I need help.”

“Hey, I need help.”

PickleBoy23: "After you're asking for help, I feel better."

"I don't understand the question."

Tony Stark: "Hey I need help on my homework."

"I go to all the teachers for help."

During the first interview, Bolt made it clear that he knew how to ask for help and who could help him: "My teacher." "I guess my math teacher would be a perfect example." After giving it more thought, Bolt added, "Mr. H. my English teacher." Bolt recalled working on a draft paper and receiving help from his behavior specialist consultant (BSC). Although Bolt knew his name was Mr. T., he did not know what the title BSC stood for, so in asking for help he asked his mother, "What's he called again?" Bolt knew that Mr. T. was another resource for support for the draft paper which he described.

> It was a draft paper on the study of romanticism and enlightenment. The book *Frankenstein*. We had to write a draft paper on one of the characters from the book on whether they were on the side of enlightenment or romanticism. Dr. Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein, was both enlightenment and romanticism. So, I did my paper on him. It was *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley.

As Bolt identified individuals that he could approach for help, he paused for a moment and then stated, "It just depends on who's a better fit for the situation." He was aware that different situations called for the skills of different helpers. Bolt was not observed specifically asking for help during the IEP meeting. However, the team discovered a few of his unexcused absences were incorrectly coded. The assistant principal (AP) fixed the error. With gratitude and a firm voice Bolt said, "Thank you Mr. P."

For PickleBoy23, requesting help, asking for feedback, and advocating for himself was a point of pride, particularly being in a cyber charter school where there is a choice of participating in either live classes in real time or asynchronous classes that allow him to complete assignments during non-school hours: “I ask any of my teachers if there's a question that I don't suppose I understand how to answer correctly.” During the first interview, he gave a specific example from his science class of asking for clarification, then advocating for himself regarding a question that was marked wrong but yet answered correctly:

> Sometimes during science-like classroom, if Ms. R. has any other students answer her a question in her RESNO correctly but a question in my RESNO over the same answers is marked wrong, I then tell her that RESNO has a mistake.

RESNO is the Learning Management System (LMS) that WCCS uses for instruction. PickleBoy23 was awarded the title of glitch finder because he often found glitches in the RESNO platform: “I’m sure capable of finding glitches, thank you.” During the IEP meeting, the case manager pointed out that if he ever got stuck on something, he would always let the teachers know and meet with the teachers for help as needed. Although PickleBoy23 did not verbally ask for help during the IEP meeting, he looked at his mother when he was unsure about how to respond to a question. She would repeat the question or rephrase it in the same manner as she did during the interview. It was clear he recognized his mother as a reliable source for help as he indicated in the second interview: “I can say that mom has also been a good helper, too.” He further acknowledged, “After you’ve asked for help, I feel better.”

During the first interview, when asked how he gets what he needs from school, Tony Stark responded, “Through the mail.” After clarification, he was easily able to identify several teachers, including his IEP case manager. He seemed proud of his ability to navigate help when needed. However, he looked at this request as an annoyance. Similar to his responses about his autism, Tony Stark appeared to put unnecessary pressure on himself:

> I go to Ms. R. for help. I go to Ms. M. for help. I go to all of the teachers for help. But sometimes I feel like a bug to them. It’s like, you know how you go to those scavenger hunts and swamps and you’re like pesky mosquitoes?

Tony Stark described his greatest help as coming from his therapist Monroe who supported his IEP counseling goals. He credited Monroe for his ability to remain stable as he again reflected on how he is impacted by his autism: “If it were not for Monroe, I would have probably lost my head. Not lost my head, but I would’ve gone crazy. Yeah, surprisingly, I haven’t gone crazy.” There were moments when he referenced getting help from the Disney love story movie, *Miraculous Ladybug*, to calm him down: “I think love solves the problem. Love can solve everything.” During the IEP meeting, Tony Stark requested help with pronouncing a few words that he stumbled on when reading his goals. When asked again during the first interview, “What happens when you ask for help?” he responded, “It gets situated.”

In theme two, “Hey, I need help,” all the participants acknowledged that there were individuals in their lives who provided help if they needed it, especially teachers. Given the challenges with communication and anxiety that students with ASD face,

knowing there was help available seemed to bring a sense of relief to the participants, evidenced by expressions of gratitude during the two interviews and the IEP meetings.

Theme 3: "All About Me."

For the third theme, although each participant exhibited varying degrees of understanding regarding their IEP and how the IEP provided benefits to their education, they all knew the document was about them. As described in Chapter Two, the IEP is the vehicle used to document supports and services for students with disabilities. It provides guidance to the IEP team on how to ensure services are delivered appropriately and legally. The IEP is designed to build on students' goals based on academics, functional performance, behavior, transition, and related services. It is reviewed annually by a team to determine student progress. Only one of the participants understood that their needs and learning style required differentiation, which is identified through the area of the IEP designated for SDIs and accommodations.

Bolt: "It just helps plan certain things for my education."

"They help lay out my future for me."

PickleBoy23: "I'm a good student who works at my own pace."

"I need multiple choice, matching, fill-in-the-blank and sequencing questions, instead of short-answer response questions."

"I like feedback."

Tony Stark: "My own goals is how I choose it actually."

"All about me. The last one, all about me."

During the first interview, Bolt was asked to talk about his IEP. He stated, "I do not know what it is for." It is important to note that, according to his mother, Bolt was

historically absent from IEP meetings as he internalized feedback he received from the team. When asked, “How do you think your IEP helps you?” he responded, “It (the IEP) just plans certain things for my education.” He added, “I don’t know exactly, but it (the IEP) does that.” His mother indicated to him during the interview that they are about to have an IEP meeting and he would attend since the meeting was his last before graduation. With a bit of surprise, he responded with “Are we?” When returning to the question of how the IEP helps him, Bolt responded, “I guess what classes, maybe, or what lesson I get, maybe. I truly don’t know.”

During the IEP meeting, the following was observed, based on a seven-item observational checklist guided by the work of Royer (2017). Each item on the checklist presented an opportunity for participants to demonstrate an awareness of how their IEP was “all about me.” The items were significant for theme three, as one prompt required the participant to disclose who team members were and identify the contributions they made to their learning. The other prompts revealed the participants’ understanding of their goals, strengths, areas of improvement, and steps needed for academic success.

Introduce Self: Bolt did not introduce himself to the IEP team, but he was also not asked to do so.

Introduce all team members: Bolt was asked to introduce the team but appeared to be surprised by this request. He could identify his special education teacher but did not realize she also served as his case manager. He knew the general education teacher. Bolt did not know who the AP was. When the case manager informed him that the AP was the LEA, Bolt asked, “What is an LEA?” The case manager explained the LEA’s role. The case manager also acknowledged to the

team that Bolt came to meetings before but did not participate. She expressed that she was pleased he was present and participating this time. The case manager also guided and prompted Bolt throughout the meeting.

State the purpose of the meeting: Bolt did not state the purpose of the meeting nor was he asked to do so. Bolt expressed during the first interview that he did not know much about his IEP.

Express personal interest and goals: Bolt expressed, "I completed the Everfi certificates." These certificates satisfied the ACT158 graduation pathway requirements for students in PA beginning with the class of 2023. Bolt stated, "I don't have any questions about graduation." When asked what he wanted to do after graduation, he replied, "Get a job and work with animals." When asked about counseling, he replied, "I like Ms. G. It's working. I try to come every week." When the case manager mentioned the role of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), Bolt asked, "What is OVR?" The case manager explained the role of OVR as a program which provides a variety of services for individuals with disabilities to assist them in preparing for employment. When asked about his SDI's and accommodations, Bolt replied, "Things are working out pretty well for me." When asked if he was proud of himself, he responded, "Yeah." He also stated, "I'm surprised this is my last meeting."

Express skills: Other than the desire to work with animals after graduation, Bolt identified no specific skills nor was he asked to discuss skills.

Ability to navigate technology virtually: Bolt's mother managed the technology during the meeting; however, during class time, Bolt navigated the technology independently.

Close the meeting: Bolt did not officially close the meeting, nor was he asked to do so, but he did say goodbye to the team.

During the second interview, Bolt referenced his IEP meeting; however, he still seemed confused regarding some of the IEP areas discussed during the meeting. Similar to his responses during the first interview, when asked how he helped to write some of his IEP goals, he responded, "I do not remember what my IEP goals were or how I helped with them or...." After thinking about the answer a little more, he replied, "I remember one of the goals. It was job, right? Me getting ready for a job." When discussing his credits, he stated "I'm 21 credits away from graduating." When asked how many credits he has now, he replied, "Somewhere around 60, 60 and up, maybe. No, 60. Sixty and up. I think 80." When asked whether he felt included or not included in the meeting, Bolt responded with a little of both:

> I felt a little that they asked me questions and some information was about me, but when they started talking about stuff that I had no idea, that I was not really focused on or really hyper focused on, I did not feel like I was included in the meeting.

Towards the end of the second interview, Bolt responded, "I did not prepare anything for the meeting. I just answered truthfully and honestly what was on my mind." He acknowledged that a lot of his answers came spontaneously. When asked how that made

him feel, he replied, “Felt like I was a bit lost on the information that was going around, because I did not know what that information was going on about.”

PickleBoy23 seemed excited about his IEP and his goals as evidenced by his responses: “My IEP is very helpful. My goal is to have zero overdues.” At WCCS, overdues are lessons projects, or assignments, that students did not complete. However, given the nature of the cyber environment, students have the flexibility to complete past assignments on their own time. PickleBoy23 understood the purpose for the IEP: “It (the IEP) helps me get things I need that I don't get from many other teachers.” He described being pleased with how the support from the IEP made him feel: “It makes me feel like a good student at school.” As in previous comments, he reiterated, “I like feedback.” PickleBoy23 realized that he received goals through his IEP. He regularly requested feedback and saw it as a way to improve academically.

During the IEP meeting, the following was observed based on the seven-item observational checklist:

Introduce Self: PickleBoy23 did not introduce himself, nor was he asked to do so.

Introduce all team members: PickleBoy23 did not officially introduce the team members, but he was not asked to do so. However, he was observed previewing the Zoom screen, named everyone on the screen, and said “hello.”

State the purpose of the meeting: PickleBoy23 did not state the purpose of the meeting, nor was he asked to do so.

Express personal interest and goals: During this portion of the meeting, PickleBoy23, appeared excited to hear the teachers talk about his

accomplishments: “I created my own plant for science. I’m so glad that you loved it.” When asked how he felt about the project, he responded, “Proud.” When one of the teachers indicated that he was a joy to have in class, he repeated the comment as if he wasn’t sure what she meant: “I’m a joy to have in class?” Then after an affirmative from the teacher, he responded, “Thank you very much, I sure am.” PickleBoy23 reflected on a major goal that he believed contributed to his success:

> What I started doing differently this year is going to live classrooms every day. Because originally, I only used to go on Fridays and now I go every day, and it makes my day better. It sure is amazing.

PickleBoy23 gave a thumbs up, held up his fist in a victory posture, and received pats on the back from his mother when given praises by the IEP team. When it was announced that he was accepted and planned to attend LIFE University, he said, “Go me!” “When the case manager encouraged PickleBoy23 to keep working on his independent living skills, he replied, “I’ll keep working on what …. OK, I’ll keep doing that.” Once the case manager clarified what independent living skills were, he understood.

Express skills: PickleBoy23 did not express any specific skills, but he responded in the affirmative when his skills were announced by others.

Ability to navigate technology virtually: The family arrived in person for the IEP meeting while the rest of the team members participated virtually. Although there were some challenges initially with technology, PickleBoy23 did not have to

navigate any of the technology. However, during instruction, he navigated the technology independently.

Close the meeting: PickleBoy23 was not officially asked to close the meeting, but he thanked everyone for coming and said goodbye.

During the second interview, PickleBoy23 expressed that he and his mother attended the IEP meeting in person because it was his last meeting before graduation. PickleBoy23 and his mother had expected some of his teachers to also be in person. However, his meeting took place while standardized testing was occurring and some of his teachers served as proctors. Nevertheless, he was pleased with the teachers who attended on Zoom. He was well aware that the meeting was "all about me, the last one, all about me." He particularly reflected on two supports he and others articulated at the meeting. The first was the SDIs and accommodations: "I need multiple choice, matching, fill-in-the-blank, and sequencing questions instead of short-answer response questions." The second was the emphasis on social skills, "They help me understand what I've been doing at school before I graduate and start to go out in the big world. They helped me, so I understand everything." When asked about how his IEP supports him, Tony Stark replied,

> Well, I think that my IEP supports me in a great way with, because I have great IEP teachers, actually helping me along the way, yeah, actually. Because if I'm hitting a rock and a hard place and some brick walls, I always have some help.

Interestingly, and in contrast to the first response, when Tony Stark was asked about the purpose of an IEP, he answered with a question: "To see how stupid people are?" His brother immediately corrected him, and he repeated his answer: "I thought it was

something for people who are actually stupid." He expanded on his answer: "I was always called stupid and other words." Tony Stark expressed that the IEP benefits him in one way and is not beneficial in another way.

During the IEP meeting, the following was observed based on the seven-item observational checklist:

Introduce Self: Tony Stark did not introduce himself, nor was he asked to do so.

Introduce all team members: Tony Stark was asked to introduce the team. He was familiar with the special and general education teacher but he did not know who the AP was. When he was told his title, he said, "He's an AP?"

State the purpose of the meeting: Tony Stark did not state the purpose of the meeting, nor was he asked to do so.

Express personal interest and goals: When speaking about his goals, similar to his interview responses, Tony Stark used analogies from animated movies. He stated, "Goals are not to impress anyone but to express myself and my mom." He reminded his case manager, "You were the last one to speak to her before the passing." Tony Stark described his one goal:

> We work on reading, writing, math, and comprehension. If you don't understand it, we can go back and guess the best we can, practice, [and] not give out the answers because that's cheating. For written expression, I remember the story of the painting where it seemed that the painting was reaching out to me.

In response to whether his SDIs and accommodations are helping, he replied,

> Are they helping? It's not like a cheating game. It's like a card game. You have to lay down some good cards and strategize. The SDIs help to break down my anxiety. I feel like [using] the calculator is cheating. I'm not going to bring it up unless it's needed.

Regarding his counseling goal he reflected,

> I meet with her on Monday and Wednesday at 5pm. If the counselor has problems with my schedule, she is willing to do it at a different time. My mom signed me up for therapy in case anything happened to her in the future. Counseling helps me beside singing in the shower.

Express skills: Tony Stark did not express any specific skills during the meeting.

Ability to navigate technology virtually: Tony Stark did not appear to experience any challenges with navigating technology. During instruction, he also navigated the technology independently.

Close the meeting: Tony Stark was not officially asked to close the meeting; however, like most of the meeting, his interjections seemed natural. He expressed the following in his closing remarks:

> I'm going to miss you all when I graduate. It's one big family even though we are not related. Have a great day and have a great next holiday everyone. I don't know what the next holiday is but I can look it up. Happy birthday to my case manager. My niece's birthday is tomorrow too.

The case manager told Tony Stark that he knows what he is doing. She also wanted him to know she was impressed with how he helped run the meeting. In the manner in which

Tony Stark was accustomed to responding, he replied, “I know everything. I’m not telling you how to do your job, but I was the backbone of the IEP.”

During the second interview when asked how he think his IEP meeting went, Tony Stark responded with a take-charge tone:

> Well, fantastic, I tried not to complicate things, but more likely compliment people who did a wonderful job of explaining things out. And same with me. I can’t take all the extra credit of reading things out but, more likely, all the teachers did their best—even the principal and stuff. Just everyone did a wonderful job of participation. So, if have to say if it was a school grade, ten points for everyone.

Tony Stark appeared to be pleased with his contributions regarding his goals: “Well, out of the tons of things that I shared were crucial information of what we do.” He also wanted the message to be clear that “my own goals is how I choose it actually.” Tony Stark acknowledged that teachers create goals but he stated, “I think that my own goals is my own goals, and I see them as mine.” Almost as an afterthought, he added,

> I think the IEP goals are important … how do I explain it? The people who work for the autism factor [Social Security Disability Office] and stuff … how do I say them? It could just pull up a file of your IEP and stuff and see how well you’re doing or how bad you’re doing [to determine benefits].

Tony Stark said he did not prepare for the IEP meeting but he felt prepared nevertheless:

> Well, more likely I didn’t prepare, and I was prepared at the same time….it was more likely to fly by the seat. What am I going to say? How am I going to say it? Who I’m going to say it to? And how I’m going to act?

In theme three, “All about me,” all three participants realized that their IEP was about them. They all understood that the IEP meeting was also about them and that those in attendance had a connection to their learning and their lives. This presented opportunities for the participants to ask questions, talk about their goals, and express their individual interest.

Theme 4: “I Also Found Out.”

In this theme, the participants revealed what they learned about themselves and others while participating in their IEP meetings. While articulating these revelations, each participant captured moments which seemed significant to their academic and personal development. These discoveries were vital to the study, confirmed the value that each participant’s voice added to the meeting, and validated them as respected members of the IEP team. The participants shared new experiences, embraced being seen and heard, and realized their presence at the IEP meeting mattered.

Bolt: “I also found out she was my special ed teacher.”

“Keep all the distractions out of the way.”

PickleBoy23: “I find I really listen.”

“Hey, no worries. You got this.”

Tony Stark: “I just felt kind of wise.”

“Just play it smooth and cool.”

“Your heart and your brain are the most valuable tool that you could use.”

During the second interview, when asked if he felt his voice was being heard in the meeting, Bolt responded, “Yes, I did, so that was super.” He added, “Well, I have to

talk to someone about how I felt whenever they have them IEP meetings." When asked some things he learned after the IEP meeting, Bolt needed think time and then stated, "Well, that I'm actually surprisingly did well despite me not really … me going in blind half the time on what I'm learning and doing. I learned that I'm like 21 credits away from graduating." Based on his response, Bolt knew that the accumulation of credits was needed to meet graduation requirements. However, his responses about the number of credits that he had or needed to earn indicated that he was not completely knowledgeable of his credit profile (although he thought he was). This is consistent with Bolt's acknowledgement of his lack of awareness of his IEP goals. Bolt knew his case manager, Ms. R., and yet he did not recognize her when described by her title, only by her name. He added, "She thinks I'm doing well, and she's also my special education teacher, which I did not know. She thinks I'm doing great in class." He apologized for not being able to express more regarding what he learned from the other teachers in the meeting. He repeated, "I do not remember, unfortunately."

When asked what advice Bolt would offer to peers who will participate in IEP meetings virtually in the future, he stated, "I'd tell them to keep a cool head, don't get distracted, and stay focused. You have to pay attention when people are talking and staying focused on what you're hearing so you know how to respond." Although this was Bolt's last IEP before graduation, he was asked what he would do if he needed to get ready for a future IEP meeting at WCCS. He responded, "Being prepared, I guess. Paying attention, keeping my head focused, and not getting any nervousness. Keep all the distractions out of the way."

PickleBoy23 was asked during the second interview if he felt his voice was heard in the meeting. He responded with some excitement, “Yeah, yeah, I think my IEP went awesome. Everyone was listening to me and responding or commenting to me.” He added, “I’ve got some good friends and teachers to communicate with.” Realizing that this would be the last IEP meeting, PickleBoy23 was asked how he prepared for the meeting: “I like, we prepared questions.” It is noted that his mother made sure they arrived early so he could eat lunch before the meeting. PickleBoy23 said, “It’s going to be very helpful,” referring to the positive message he gave himself before the meeting. As he realized this was his last IEP meeting, he emphasized again, “It’s all about me.” He was ready.

PickleBoy23 revealed some things he learned during the meeting. “I have learned how to be social and polite a little more and to others. And I'm also learning how to take care of myself.” This was an important reference to the independent living skill goals discussed in the meeting. More importantly, he wanted everyone to know that “I am one of the best students at WCCS.” As in previous themes and during the IEP meeting, PickleBoy23 reiterated what he discovered: “Going to live classes each day is making my days a little faster and easier.” PickleBoy23 also described finding out how much his teachers were proud of his progress and accomplishments. He particularly remembered the impact his presence made on one teacher, “Yeah, oh yeah. Yes, just by showing up and having fun with him, I made him happy even if he was having a bad day.” Remembering what his mother has done, he interjected, “I can say that mom has been a great help, too. I can also say, if there’s a question but I’m not sure how to answer for you, sometimes mom can help me answer it.” PickleBoy23 was asked what advice he

would give his peers who will participate in IEP meetings virtually in the future. He mentioned one peer in particular and offered, “I could say to him that, wait, I know, at first, he’s feeling nervous about it. I could say, ‘Hey, no worries, buddy.’” He paused for a moment and then added, “You got this.”

During the second interview and despite having to suddenly prepare for another relocation, Tony Stark appeared to present with the same energetic spirit demonstrated throughout the first interview and the IEP meeting. When asked if he felt his voice was being heard in the meeting, Tony Stark responded,

> Yeah, I felt like I was heard because, honestly, it’s the first time ever of me speaking out loud instead of hiding in the shadows. Because my mom actually had this planned. It’s a family plan. Well, I guess my mom’s plan didn’t actually work out to get me out of that shadow, actually. I guess I got out of it myself.

After that reflection, he returned to an opposite view about being in the background: “I felt like … yeah. Sometimes, it’s just I hide in the shadows because I feel like it’s just because I’m scared of what other people’s opinions would be like, for instance, if I said something like stupid.” In his IEP meeting and in two interviews, Tony Stark shared that he thought he was in the shadows. However, neither of the three encounters provided evidence of being in the shadows. He spoke up even if he believed what he had to say was not always accurate. He did not use the term *stupid* during the IEP meeting, but he did use the term multiple times during the two interviews. On both occasions, he was assured by others that he was not stupid.

After the IEP meeting, Tony Stark revealed that he learned quite a few things: “I learned a lot of things and stuff about myself.” After making a reference to the Avengers

(during the interviews he typically made references to movies), he added, “I just felt kind of wise.” Tony Stark spoke highly of his case manager throughout the interviews and the IEP meeting:

> Beside the teacher award, I like Ms. R.’s honesty … she goes above and beyond her work [and] always makes sure we get things done in a fun way. She puts fun in education. That why I said that she deserves a reward for it.

While Tony Stark didn’t reveal anything new that he learned about his older brother and guardian, considering their losses, he expressed learning *from* him: “The one thing I can learn from him is just trying to be the best guardian ever and support each decision of mine [as much] as possible.” Initially, Tony Stark was not as forthcoming with offering advice to his peers who will participate in IEP meetings virtually in the future:

> Well, if I had any advice, actually, [it] is to never follow my advice because I, honestly, it’s just like …because sometimes you just [have]to answer your own brain and from your heart, because honestly, your heart and your brain are the most valuable tool that you could use.

After making that statement, he demonstrated a change of heart and offered, “I think virtual IEP is a better thing now especially because of COVID19.” While speaking of technology, Tony Stark presented the idea of a future IEP phone app for accessing and giving input to IEP goals, progress, and other information.

> Well, only parents and guardians could get it, and it’s just to see what your child’s IEP is and stuff, and the guardian could change it with the teacher’s permission. But you would have to know your RESNO password or your RESNO email.

Since Tony Stark will be a super senior for the 2023-24 school year, he was asked what he would do to prepare for the next IEP meeting. He responded, “I don’t know. Just play it smooth and cool, actually.”

In theme four, “I also found out,” all three participants revealed learning something new about themselves or about others. All three participants expressed they felt heard during the IEP meeting. This was the last meeting for two of the participants. Bolt knew he had enough credits to graduate but was not knowledgeable of how many credits he had earned, “60…60 and up. I think 80.” PickleBoy23 seemed thrilled to learn that he was accepted to LIFE University to study his two favorite subjects, math and science. Tony Stark will be a super senior for the next school year. He appeared extremely proud of his recommendation to WCCS to invest in the IEP app for parents and guardians. All three participants expressed positive words of encouragement and advice to classmates preparing for future IEP meetings.

The researcher followed six steps suggested by Creswell (2016) for examining the raw data. The four themes emerged through the lens of what Clandinin et al. (2016) described as narrative inquiry as the researcher presented the experiences of three participants.

Through inductive analysis, after the researcher engaged in several reviews of the participant’s words from the interviews and observations, an interest surfaced in what Niemiec and Ryan (2009) identified as SDT. SDT empowers educators to focus on a student’s natural curiosity, love of learning, and thirst for knowledge. Subsequently, the researcher considered deductive coding as an opportunity to explore what Chen and Jang (2010) described as the three universal and basic needs humans possess: autonomy,

competence, and relatedness. With that in mind, the researcher wanted to confirm or reject how the tenets of the SDT would come through in the participant's voices.

Deductive Analysis

This section will discuss the findings derived from the codes through deductive analysis of the interview transcripts and the IEP observations. Creswell (2016) explained deductive coding as a top-down system where the researcher engages in a process of using an existing theory and aligning the participants' words or actions based on the theory or philosophy. Chen and Jang (2010) identified autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the tenets of SDT. The decision to use these themes was based on what Niemiec and Ryan (2009) described as a focus on students' natural curiosities, individual interests, and desires to investigate the world around them. Therefore, the researcher explored how the voices of the participants' aligned with their ability to take control of their lives (autonomy), demonstrate mastery in academics or other skills (competence), and feel connected to others (relatedness).

Deductive analysis supported answering the research question as each participant described or exhibited some or all the tenets related to how they managed themselves during the interviews and IEP meetings. It was important for the researcher to highlight participants individually based on the three tenets of the SDT. This approach added a layer to their stories which sharpened the spotlight on each participant's unique interests. Their contributions to discussions, their inquiries triggered by curiosity or need for clarity, and their desire for inclusion added to the researcher's understanding of how participants perceived their involvement in their IEP meetings.

Bolt

During the first interview, although Bolt responded to the questions, he did not appear to demonstrate autonomy. Perhaps his limited understanding of his IEP and goals contributed to feeling a loss of control. This behavior was also evident during the IEP meeting observation. Bolt appeared to be taken by surprise when guided by his case manager to participate and discuss his goals. There was a brief moment when Bolt expressed his desire to do what he enjoys—"Get a job and work with animals"— once he graduated; this seemed to indicate a small level of autonomy. During the second interview, Bolt expressed the belief that his voice was heard in the meeting: "I just answered, truthfully and honestly, what was on my mind."

During both interviews, Bolt demonstrated his capability to ask for help and learn how to advocate for himself by understanding his own needs. Most notably, Bolt showed the ability to discuss his love of animals and share his research on animals of interest. During the IEP observation, Bolt demonstrated a level of competency as he expressed that he completed two Everfi certificates needed to meet his graduation pathway: "One of them was Metaverse Safety, and the other was Credit Scores." He seemed particularly satisfied with this accomplishment.

During the interviews, Bolt's expressions of appreciation towards his teachers displayed relatedness, and a sense of belonging, acceptance, and inclusion. Bolt also expressed a connection with his fellow classmates who were involved in his social skills group. During the IEP observation, Bolt demonstrated relatedness when expressing his appreciation for the social skills session with the counselor: "It's working, I try to come every week. Things are out pretty well for me." Another example of relatedness was

Bolt's connection to an IEP team member who helped him during the meeting. He appeared grateful for the AP who changed his unexcused absence to excused, responding immediately with "thank you Mr. P." This was significant because, at the beginning of the IEP meeting when the AP was introduced, Bolt asked, "What is an AP?"

PickleBoy23

During the interviews, PickleBoy23 demonstrated autonomy by explaining how he took control of his school schedule and determined what learning style worked best for him. This revelation came to him after discovering he was working harder and not smarter. Once he figured out the conditions in which he learned best, he took control over how he engaged with his classes. However, during the IEP meeting, PickleBoy23 demonstrated no autonomy. Perhaps this was due to moments of multiple people speaking at once and PickleBoy23's struggle to follow the conversation, a challenge which he associated with autism. Also, his mother often interjected to explain a response or repeat to him a question that was asked. Equally, his challenges with communication (slight stutter) and his acknowledgement that "I have a hard time paying attention and listening to others" may have contributed to this absence of autonomy. Nevertheless, PickleBoy23 expressed that going to all live classes with teachers and classmates in real time (versus only attending asynchronous courses) worked better for him and allowed him to complete his work more efficiently: "It makes my day better. It sure is amazing." PickleBoy23 seemed confident about what he wanted to pursue after high school: "I want to be a nature rescuer." The IEP team expressed pleasure with his ability to advocate for himself in terms of getting the feedback he needs from his teachers to help support his academic needs—and PickleBoy23 confirmed it.

PickleBoys23 also demonstrated competence during the interviews and IEP observations. He expressed, “I love of math and science a lot.” He appeared comfortable when discussing both subjects. This love of both subjects was supported by a description he gave of a statistics project in which he interviewed a college professor on which species is the most invasive. He reported, “She chose humans.” It should be noted, according to his mother, that PickleBoy23 has taken every math and science class he possibly could at WCCS. During the IEP meeting, PickleBoy23 shared that he “created [his] very own planet for science.” When teachers discussed his progress in class, PickleBoy23 appeared to know that he was being praised for the success. He responded with a “great” after each teacher gave a report and followed with a thumbs up. He seemed proud of himself for being able to serve as a technology helper for some of his teachers. He stated, “I sure am capable of finding the glitches,” referring to RESNO, the learning management system at WCCS.

During the IEP interviews, it appeared that PickleBoy23 had established strong connections with of all his teachers especially given his ability to advocate for himself when needed. There was also a sense of belonging when PickleBoy23 discussed his participation in the social skills group. More importantly, PickleBoy23 expressed his feelings of inclusion when he participated with classmates in Kahoot and other competitive learning games that checked for understanding. It should be noted that his participation in these games was not something that PickleBoy23 had done in the past because of the speed that is required to read the questions, answer the questions, and compete with classmates. While PickleBoy23 experienced challenges early in the year at his previous school, he expressed feelings of relatedness to WCCS by saying, “Here’s

one big thing I'm going to tell you. WCC … no, wait a second. WCCS is the best school I ever went to." During the IEP meeting, PickleBoy23 seemed to have an immediate connection with the IEP team, evidenced by the way he named everyone on the Zoom screen that that was familiar to him and smiled as he called their names. When his science teacher said he was a joy to have in class, he said confidently, "I sure am." PickleBoy23 appeared to have an ongoing connection with his mother who sat next to and supported him during the entire meeting (and the interviews). For most of the IEP meeting, PickleBoy23 showed excitement in speaking to the IEP team, especially after receiving compliments for his progress on his contributions to the classroom.

PickleBoy23 used his role as the glitch finder to build connections with his teachers and classmates. In addition, he took his ability to advocate for himself a step further as teachers described the connections he made with some of his classmates. PickleBoy23 advocated for students who didn't go to live classes and, as a result, didn't receive feedback before a quiz or test. The ability to go from advocating for himself to advocating for other students was a skill that PickleBoy23 developed over time.

Tony Stark

Tony Stark demonstrated a strong sense of autonomy. Although he appeared challenged by the housing insecurity that he and his brother experienced and was still grieving the loss of his mother, these events did not seem to interfere with his ability to demonstrate a sense of control in the interviews. Tony Stark seemed attentive and focused for the majority of the interviews. He raised important questions and offered synopses of events that were both related and unrelated to the interviews. Tony Stark also exhibited autonomy throughout the IEP meeting, evidenced by asking and answering

questions, inserting opinions, addressing specific IEP team members, and interjecting off-topic stories. In fact, he demonstrated a command for the meeting and a comfort level that appeared to imitate a co-leading situation. At one point, he was put on the spot to read. After finishing, he said, “I have the confidence and the will power.” During the IEP observation, Tony Stark expressed that he wanted to be in control of the SDIs and accommodations he uses, especially when it comes to using a calculator: “I’m not going to bring it up unless it is needed.” He also took charge of his schedule and worked with his counselor if there were conflicts. His command of the meeting was evident during the closing when he stated, “I know everything. I’m not telling you how to do your job, but I was the backbone of the IEP.”

During the interviews, Tony Stark exhibited competency through what seemed like a range of broad expressions of his imagination. He also demonstrated people skills through his ability to approach specific individuals when he needed something clarified. Tony Stark demonstrated a deep understanding of ideas or concepts as evidenced by his ability to explain events using various analogies based on movies and video games. During the IEP observation, Tony Stark spoke about his written expression goals using figurative language: “I remember the story of the painting where it seemed that the painting was reaching out to me.” Regarding his other goals, he expressed, “I only say this: My own goals is how I choose it actually.” He was knowledgeable about his SDIs and accommodations. He carefully explained how he viewed some accommodations as cheating but reasoned, “The SDIs help to break down my anxiety.” His case manager noted how Tony Stark shared several coping skills with his social skills group. Interestingly, Tony Stark charged WCCS to consider creating an “IEP app for parents and

guardians." This technology would allow parents and guardians to share their input and receive information on the child's IEP goals and progress.

Tony Stark showed relatedness at each stage of the study. He was engaged from the very beginning of the interviews and appeared to accept the get-to-know-you questions as an invitation to establish connections with the researcher by discussing off-topic subjects. Once he realized the exchange of communication was received and favorable, he expressed feeling included and used that as an opportunity to be himself. During the IEP observation, his relatedness was evident on several levels. The first was his connection to Ms. R, the case manager. He recalled, "You were the last teacher to speak to her (his mother) before the passing." It seemed that the encounter with Ms. R. sealed a connection between Tony Stark and his family that only grew. Tony Stark was praised for his perfect attendance in the social skills group and for being an active participant. Tony Stark confirmed, "Counseling helps beside me singing in the shower." As a compliment to himself, he confirmed his feelings of inclusion, belonging, and acceptance during the meeting by reminding the team: "I know everything. I'm not telling you how to do your job, but I was the backbone of the IEP."

The researcher found the use of deductive coding, based on the three tenets of SDT—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—to be a significant contribution to the study. Specifically, this lens allowed the researcher to delve further into the identity of the participants and consider their unique challenges and talents. Each participant of SDT demonstrated various levels of the three tenets during the interviews and the IEP meetings. Given the significance of guiding the student-centered IEP through building relationships, there was evidence that all three participants experienced acceptance and

inclusion (relatedness) from their special education case manager, teachers, and other support people largely due to the relationship building that guided this student-centered IEP process.

Summary

This chapter detailed the experiences of three high school seniors with ASD who attended WCCS and participated in their virtual IEP meetings. The participants' responses were based on four themes: "It's there but it's not there," "Hey, I need help," "All about me," and "I also found out." Conversely, through the deductive analysis process that Creswell (2016) referred to as verifying a theory, the researcher examined the data through the lens of the three tenets of SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The next chapter discusses the research findings, limitations, considerations for special education teachers and administrators, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how high school seniors with ASD perceive their involvement in IEP meetings within a cyber charter school environment. The researcher achieved this goal by reviewing documents, conducting pre and post interviews, and observing the IEP meetings. Two approaches proved significant for this study.

The narrative inquiry approach to the study allowed the researcher to analyze the first-person accounts of the participants' experiences using three lenses. Through the biological lens, participants talked about their interests, the influential people in their lives, and their supports. Through the psychological lens, participants described the process of how they arrived at certain conclusions. The way participants' spoke—their tone of voice, energy and emphasis—contributed to the linguistic lens, which the researcher used in developing the narratives. (Clandinin et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Through a researcher's desire to know more about a participant's story, the participant and the researcher become linked. According to Clandinin et al. (2016), the researchers' experiences are also woven into the story, but not in a way that overshadows the voice of the participant.

The second approach which proved significant to the study was based on the SDT framework developed by psychologists Ryan and Deci (2000). During the interviews and observations, each of the three participants demonstrated one or more of the three tenets of the SDT framework.

This chapter will discuss the relationship of the study's findings to the research question, the limitations of the study, considerations for educators, and recommendations

for future research. The discussion of the findings addresses answers to the research question based on the themes that emerged from the participants' voices. The limitations present specific characteristics of the study that may have impacted the results. Finally, the considerations for WCCS educators and administrators lay the groundwork for outlining recommendations for future research and further exploration of students with ASD and their involvement in their IEP meetings.

Discussion of Findings

Research supports that students with disabilities, particularly students with ASD, often face challenges that prevent them from taking an active role in their IEP meetings (Hagner et al. 2014). Aligned with this research, Bolt and Tony Stark described the troublesome experiences they endured with special education teachers and IEP teams prior to enrolling in WCCS. Their lack of prior participation was reflected in their interview responses. This study employed a narrative inquiry approach, using inductive analysis to reveal codes and establish themes based on the participants' voices. The researcher designed this study to align with three tenets of the SDT, which Chen and Jang (2010) identify as autonomy (feeling a sense of control), competence (demonstrating skills), and relatedness (feelings of connections with others).

The following research question guided this study**:** How do high school seniors with ASD perceive their involvement in IEP meetings, within a cyber charter school environment? It is important to understand that the answer to this research question comprises several layers. Autism is a complex, lifelong condition that can significantly affect verbal and nonverbal communication, and social interaction (Muratidis, 2019; IDEA, Individual with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Moreover, since 1975, all

public school districts have been required to provide the proper educational services and support to students with disabilities. The primary tool used to document these services and supports is the IEP, which Blackwell and Rosetti (2014) defined as "a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised" (p. 2). With that in mind, the IEP serves to educate students about their disability and the need to demonstrate self-advocacy. Therefore, themes one and two establish context for the research question. Themes three and four reveal greater insight on the participants' perceptions of their involvement in their IEP meetings. The four themes are discussed below.

Theme One: "It's There but It's Not There."

Theme one explored the participants' awareness and knowledge of their autism. During the interviews and observations, all the participants expressed an awareness of their autism, elaborating in greater detail regarding their knowledge of it. Bolt, who specifically used the phrase "It's there but it's not there," wanted to make it clear that most of the time his autism is not there and he doesn't see it getting in the way of his day-to-day activities. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that when it is there, there are a lot of questions racing through his mind. PickleBoy23 expressed that his autism manifests in his inability, at times, to pay attention and listen to others, requiring him to ask for questions to be repeated. This characteristic was observed during the IEP meeting. Although PickleBoy23 was focused on the meeting, at times it appeared that he was thinking about something else. He would then catch himself not paying attention and refocus his attention. Interestingly, PickleBoy23's mother shared that after a challenging

beginning to his education, the identification of autism came somewhere around the first grade. His first-grade teacher expressed that she did not believe in autism.

Tony Stark was outspoken about his autism and did not seem to be hesitate about identifying his challenges. Specifically, he discussed the anxiety and panic attacks that accompany his autism. He gave examples of moments when panic and anxiety attacks are at their highest points. At one point, he asked his older brother if the descriptions that he gave of his autism characteristics were correct. His older brother agreed with Tony Spark's description and then proceeded to add his own. Although Tony Stark did not appear to externally demonstrate panic or anxiety attacks during the two interviews or IEP observation, there were moments of agitation that could potentially have triggered panic or anxiety. These moments occurred when he spoke about the passing of his mother and the homelessness that he, his older brother, and his nephew experienced.

Using the data collected in the study, the researcher concluded that all three participants were aware and had knowledge of their autism and its impact on their lives. Subsequently, based on each participant's description of their autism, evidence of the characteristics were demonstrated during the observation of the IEP meeting.

Theme Two: "Hey, I Need Help."

Theme two uncovered the participants' ability to demonstrate advocacy and take ownership of their education and needs. Data from the interviews and notes from the IEP meeting observations indicated that the three participants knew who to go to for help. All three identified their special education teachers, who also served as their case managers, as their first point of contact for help. During the IEP meeting, Bolt knew Ms. R. was his special education teacher but was not familiar with her title of case manager. All three

participants could identify other teachers who helped them with their academic needs. In addition, they named at least one family member whom they could approach for help. More importantly, Bolt, PickleBoy23, and Tony Stark communicated specific language for requesting help. PickleBoy23 spoke a few times regarding his advocacy when requesting specific feedback from his teachers to help him prepare for upcoming quizzes and projects. PickleBoy23 felt that without this specific feedback, he was prevented from planning and preparing for upcoming assessments. He discovered that his persistence and self-advocacy would not only benefit him but also some of his classmates who were, at times, not as forthright with their requests for help.

During the IEP meeting, Tony Stark described feeling comfortable asking his teachers for help when needed. But at times, he also used terms like "pesky mosquito" to express that he might be bothering them, and he did not want to feel that way. He was encouraged by his older brother to always seek out help and to self-advocate. Above all, each participant knew the importance of self-advocacy. Tony Stark showed advocacy during the IEP observation. He made it clear that he needed help with certain goals and explained to the IEP team how specific support was beneficial. He spoke openly about how the counseling sessions helped him: "Counseling helps, besides me singing in the shower."

Using the data collected in the study, the researcher determined that all three participants understood the benefits of self-advocacy. Each used different approaches to request the help but, regardless of the approach, all three received the help they needed. Themes one and two provide context for the participants' understanding of their disability

and how they advocated for support. The next two themes address their perceptions of their involvement in their IEP meeting.

Theme Three: "All About Me."

Theme three examined the participants' knowledge of their IEP as well as their involvement during the IEP meeting. Based on the interview responses and observations, all the participants understood that they received special education support through a special education teacher; however, their understanding of the IEP varied.

During the first interview, Bolt was honest that he did not understand the purpose of the IEP. Bolt had a vague understanding that the IEP had something to do with his education, but he could not state exactly how the IEP supported his educational goals. As previously stated, his mother acknowledged that Bolt had not attended any recent IEP meetings based on past negative experiences. His mother explained that his behavior regressed after he attended his IEP meeting when he was younger.

During the IEP meeting observation, Bolt admitted to not knowing all the team members or their roles: "What is an LEA?" Bolt responded to what appeared to be on-the-spot questions asked by his case manager throughout the meeting, and he articulated some of his goals upon request, although he seemed to be caught off guard when asked to participate at the level he did. As the meeting progressed, he appeared to understand that he was the focus of the meeting as evidenced by making eye contact with the speakers, responding to questions, and in one instance, correcting his mother. However, Bolt confirmed during the second interview that although he answered questions and read his goals, he did not remember what those goals were and, at times, felt lost. He also

confirmed during the second interview that while he knew his support in school came from an IEP, he was not always involved with the process or the meeting.

PickleBoy23 appeared to have a general understanding of his IEP and expressed, "It's all about me." Over the past 11 years at WCCS, PickleBoy23 explored strategies to determine how he learned best and then found ways to explain that to his teachers. He knew the IEP helped him meet this challenge. PickleBoy23 shared that he understood the IEP would help him "get things" that he doesn't always get from all of his teachers. Although there were moments during the interviews and the IEP meeting when PickleBoy23 seemed to have difficulty articulating his thoughts, he made it clear that among the "things" he needed was continuous feedback from his teachers. He referenced this at several stages of the IEP meeting and stressed to the team that he worked hard at building up the confidence to self-advocate for feedback.

During the IEP meeting, PickleBoy23 did not appear to be guided by his case manager. Perhaps it was because he had a different case manager facilitating his IEP meeting. The other two participants had the same case manager. His mother, who sat next to PickleBoy23, had a hard copy of the IEP and she and PickleBoy23 followed along as the case manager facilitated. His mother would point out specific areas to PickleBoy23 that were being addressed, and he would make comments or ask questions. In the second interview, PickleBoy23 remembered his goals, but more importantly, he reiterated his need for "multiple choice, matching, fill-in-the-blank, and sequencing questions, instead of short-answer response questions." He emphasized that SDIs and accommodations were important.

Tony Stark knew that the IEP was about him; however, he commented that the document was for “stupid people.” He expressed that he was reminded of the times in his life when he had been called stupid. It seemed that he needed to say those words out loud to be comforted by the adults on Zoom, who assured him that he was not stupid nor was it the purpose of the IEP That confirmation changed his tone as he acknowledged the IEP was, in fact, all about him: “I think the IEP helps me.” Tony Stark’s performance during the IEP meeting confirmed that he knew the IEP, and the IEP meeting was all about him.

During the meeting, the case manager guided Tony Stark through areas of the IEP. She asked prompting questions: “Please read your ELA, goal.” “Please read your math goal.” “Please read your social skills goal.” It is important to note that Bolt and Tony Stark were assigned the same case manager, Ms. R. She used similar strategies for guiding both participants throughout the meeting by asking them to read their goals aloud and posing questions regarding their progress on IEP goals. Although he initially seemed caught off guard by the request to respond, Tony Stark did not take long to acclimate himself to the flow of the meeting. At one point, he seemed to be co-leading the meeting, although he had not been prepared to do so, particularly when he discussed the details of his reading, writing, math, and social skills goals. Tony Stark also used this momentary spotlight to interject and make analogies based on his favorite movies and video games. The use of these references seemed to divert feelings of panic and anxiety, which (he stated in the interviews) are traits that he is challenged with as an individual with autism.

All three participants understood that the IEP was about them. Using the data collected in the study, Bolt’s limited involvement stemmed from what was described as a history of negative feedback in IEP meetings prior to enrolling at WCCS. Bolt’s

participation at his last IEP meeting before graduation confirmed that he was not familiar with his IEP goals. Although the case manager guided Bolt in reading his goals, it seemed clear that this was the first time he had seen the document. Regarding PickleBoy23, the researcher concluded he was accustomed to attending his IEP meetings; however, based on the meeting observation, his participation seemed dependent on his mother, given his tendencies to lose focus and attention. Nevertheless, most of PickleBoy23's participation focused on making sure the IEP team understood that he required feedback. Given the challenges that Tony Stark and his family had experienced, the researcher concluded that he had not prepared to be an active participant in his IEP meeting. Yet, he demonstrated a high level of involvement. Responding to the case manager's questions came easy to Tony Stark. He used that spotlight as an opportunity to elaborate on topics related and unrelated to the IEP. At times, he had to be redirected back to the meeting topic.

Theme Four: "I Also Found Out."

After attending and participating in their IEP meetings, all three participants learned elements themselves and their interactions with others. However, what seemed the most revealing were feelings of inclusion and being heard. Each participant articulated this discovery differently during the second interview. It is important to note that two of the three participants attended their final IEP meeting before graduation.

Bolt revealed in the first interview that he did not know what his IEP was for or what his goals were. Subsequently, his mother allowed him to attend the last IEP meeting before graduation. During the meeting, Bolt appeared able to follow the guidance of his

case manager to read his IEP goals and answer questions about those goals. Overall, Bolt expressed that he felt included, but there were times that he also felt lost:

> I felt a little that they asked me questions and some information was about me, but when they started talking about stuff that I had no idea, that I was not really focused on or really hyper focused on, I did not feel like I was included in the meeting.

In a sense, his last IEP seemed almost like one of his first, evidenced by not understanding the role of the LEA, not understanding his credit profile, and not being familiar with his goals. Perhaps discussions about his special education program and preparation over the years could have increased his understanding of the exchange of information during the IEP meeting. The advice Bolt offered others involved in their meetings—"keep a cool head, don't get distracted, stay cool"—may have served him well if he had been given the opportunity to be involved.

PickleBoy23 appeared to be familiar with his special education program and the functions of the IEP meetings given the level of support provided by his mother. PickleBoy23 expressed how pleased he was to see and speak with his teachers, and he said, "I actually felt included." Although it seemed that he has always been heavily supported by his mother, particularly due to the difficult years he had in grades K-1 before the autism identification, there were moments when PickleBoy23 appeared not to understand some of the content during the meeting. This was evidenced by looking to his mother when questions were not clear. His mother repeated the questions or clarified any comments made by the other team members, and PickleBoy23 nodded his head in an affirming manner. Considering PickleBoy23's acknowledgement of losing focus and

needing to have questions repeated, he picked up on the praise teachers expressed about his performance and was excited to learn how they felt.

Besides getting the role of the case manager and principal mixed up during the IEP meeting, Tony Stark seemed to surprise himself regarding his involvement. He expressed, “It's the first time ever of me speaking out loud instead of just hiding in the shadows.” Once he realized his voice was being heard, his contributions to the discussions and his confidence increased. Nevertheless, he learned a lot about himself and his capabilities. He moved into the role of co-leading the meeting without any preparation: “It was more likely to fly by the seat.”

From the data collected in the study, three conclusions surfaced. First, by virtue of the participants’ involvement, each discovered new information. Specifically, Bolt discovered that his case manager was also his special education teacher. Perhaps if there had been prior involvement in his IEP meetings, this may not have been new information. PickleBoy23 realized how proud his teachers were of his performance. This seemed to increase his confidence in preparation for attending college. Tony Stark suggested WCCS create an “IEP app” that parents and guardians could use to give input to their child’s IEP and follow their progress. These discoveries further allowed the participants to offer advice to classmates who will attend meetings in the future.

Secondly, based on the data collected through both interviews and the IEP meeting observation, the researcher concluded that all three participants had little understanding of the IEP document itself. Bolt expressed that he did not know what his IEP was for and did not know what his IEP goals were. PickleBoy23 explained that his IEP helped him get things that he doesn’t receive from other teachers but was not able to

get more specific without involvement of his mother. Although Tony Stark initially expressed that the IEP was for "stupid people," he admitted that it was to help him. Although he elaborated further on the IEP during the second interview, he still admitted, "It was more likely to fly by the seat."

Elias et al. (2017) reported that students with ASD can present challenges with executive functioning that impact their lives beyond high school and "require more educator informed support" (p. 33). Therefore, the third conclusion, based on the data collected, was that each participant experienced difficulties with self-control or the ability to pay attention. During the IEP meeting, Bolt's mother mentioned his nervousness when presented with a new situation and her concern regarding how his panic attacks in some social settings could impact future employment. Similarly, Tony Stark described his issues with self-control: "I have panic attacks and anxiety attacks. And then the panic and panic attacks and the anxiety attacks and then with the depression, it kind of, I don't know, it's a panic. A panic, depression and anxiety attack." Tony Stark presented evidence of these panic and anxiety episodes during the interviews when discussing the loss of his mother and his homelessness. In the interview, PickleBoy23 admitted, "I have a hard time paying attention and listening to others." This was evident in the interviews and IEP meeting as PickleBoy23 relied on his mother to repeat or clarify questions. Bolt and PickleBoy23 graduated this past spring. Tony Stark will return to WCCS as a super senior in the fall and continue to receive support with executive functioning skills for another year before graduating with the class of 2024.

Finally, regarding the cyber charter school experience, all three participants expressed how much their school experience improved once enrolled in WCCS. Bolt

attended WCCS for four years. His mother asserted that the best IEPs Bolt received in his education were created during his time at WCCS. At prior IEP meetings before coming to WCCS, Bolt would listen to team members providing him with feedback regarding undesirable behaviors, and this led to an increase in those behaviors. PickleBoy23 attended WCCS for 11 years. He spent most of his education at WCCS. His first two years of school before the autism classification were challenging, especially first grade, because the teacher did not believe in autism and suggested it was all behavioral. Hence, PickleBoy23 did not get the help he needed for the first two years. He said, "I am so glad you took me out of that school. I am so happy to be at WCCS." Tony Stark attended WCCS for four years. Regarding his experience before coming to WCCS, he explained,

> They could not deal with me having seizures and me being autistic. So, they just gave me the boot, and they just said … they just gave me the boot and just like, "We can't deal with you anymore." So, my mom took me out of there. But I'm glad that she took me out of that school because that school was crazy and stuff like that and everything.

Based on negative encounters in their previous schools, all three participants articulated a positive experience at WCCS. Their appreciation of the special education program and the support from their case managers and teachers was reflected in the interviews and observations. These findings support the research indicating that students with ASD who attended and were involved in their IEP meetings expressed themselves more, displayed increased engagement in conversation about post-school plans with their families, and spent more time in the general education setting (Hagner et al., 2014). Regarding increases in self-expressions and time spent in general education classes, the

participants' actions aligned with the research. Despite some of the communication challenges PickleBoy23 experienced, during the interviews, he talked at length about his plans for LIFE University and his love for math and science. Tony Stark treated the IEP team as a captive audience for expressing himself. At times, the meeting served as an extension of his counseling sessions with Monroe as he discussed the loss of his mother and experiences of homelessness after her death.

Ryan and Deci (2000) described the second tenet of SDT as intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation. The researcher found all of the participants were intrinsically motivated by different areas of interest including music, video games, movies, animals, math, and science. They naturally possessed a love for learning and engagement with these areas of interest. They did not seem to need any external stimuli to engage in these activities and wanted to pursue their interests beyond high school. The researcher did not observe an alignment with extrinsic motivation among the three participants. When Bolt received praises from teachers and other staff, he would simply say "thank you" in his typical reserved demeanor. PickleBoy23 seem surprised when his teachers and others would say he did a good job or "I'm proud of you" when referencing his schoolwork, advocacy, or participation in social groups. He would respond in a manner that indicated he did not believe them and needed confirmation: "I did? You are?" Tony Stark gave himself praises and did not appear to need them from the stakeholders to feel validated. Hence, amotivation was not observed in the three participants. In different ways, each participant was motivated by something. The boys were who they were, and they loved what they loved.

The notion of what Creswell and Creswell (2018) described as thoughtful listening through a constructivist worldview was particularly crucial in the context of this study as the literature emphasized the challenges students with ASD encounter in terms of communication (Hagner et al., 2014). This challenge was visible for all three participants, especially during the IEP meeting observations as evidenced by their attempts to express complete thoughts, brief periods of slight stuttering, and discussions of unrelated topics during the IEP meeting. Through qualitative research, underrepresented communities whose perspectives are rarely heard are presented with opportunities to tell the stories of how they may be impacted by issues related to social injustices and human problems (Creswell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Clandinin (2016) relied on narrative inquiry to explore the participants' identity and that approach served as a rudder to guide this study. Bolt's absence over the years from IEP meetings due to negative feedback received in prior meetings, PickleBoy23's difficulty during the first two years of school due to an educator's disbelief in autism, and Tony Stark's loss of his mother and his housing insecurity were three important lenses that contributed to the researcher's story of the participants.

Limitations

As with any study, it was necessary to acknowledge and identify the limitations of the research. Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) defined limitations as potential weaknesses that are usually out of the researcher's control" (p. 156). There were five limitations that surfaced. The limitation was based on the researcher's reduced capacity to study more than one of the 13 disabilities under IDEA. Therefore, the disability of ASD was chosen given the specific challenges with communication, anxiety, and

socialization that students faced when attending and participating in their IEP meetings (Hagner et al., 2014). Given the researcher's access to the students, teachers, and other available resources, the second limitation was that the study used a convenience and purposeful sampling, which resulted in recruiting a small number of participants. Although Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommended that the researcher select a "minimum sample size based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study" (p. 102), using only three participants excluded the voices of other students with ASD such as females and those in other grade levels or at other levels of programs and support. However, the small sample size allowed for an in-depth focus on the identity and individualism of each participant and their involvement in IEP meetings. The third limitation that affected the findings included the identification of potential participants and the participation of the student's special education teachers who also served as the case managers. Based on specific criteria, case managers were asked to identify students with ASD who were capable of participating in the study. Each case manager's caseload consisted of students with ASD who were all receiving itinerant level learning support. However, given the uniqueness of each student, the case manager determined some were more appropriate than others for this study. This process eliminated students and speaks to the vast differences in the way autism presents. Case managers participated in the IEP meetings but were not interviewed to gain their perspectives. Furthermore, the role of the researcher may have influenced their choice to engage in the study. Although the researcher did not supervise any of the case managers, they may have felt obligated to participate. They may have also believed that their performance during the IEP meeting was being evaluated. The fourth limitation identified

was the virtual platform used to conduct the interviews and the IEP observations. This absence of in-person opportunities reduced the researchers' chances of witnessing non-verbal communication and other information from the setting that would be useful in the data collection. Lastly, deciding to focus solely on the perceptions of students essentially eliminated the voices of parents and guardians.

Considerations for Special Education Teachers and Administrators

The thick and rich description of events in the participants' lives are potentially transferrable and could apply to other similar ASD populations, students with various learning challenges, and situations within educational environments. Although the findings of this study were not established for generalizability, self-determination and the SDT is an area where students both with and without disabilities require support from parents, educators, and other stakeholders to be successful; therefore, generalizability is applicable. Specifically, the three basic needs that Chen and Jang (2010) described as autonomy, competence, and relatedness all speak to how these areas increase an individual's motivation to learn, grow and develop. Like the three participants, all students want and need to feel some control over areas of their lives. Secondly, students feel successful when they are able to demonstrate an understanding of concepts or skills. This is especially true for students with disabilities who often require SDI and accommodations to support academic, physical, or emotional challenges. Thirdly, all humans need to feel connected to others. For school-age children, these connections and feelings of inclusion help to create spaces that allow them to share and communicate their interests and desires with peers and adults. These areas are particularly important at the secondary level as students begin planning for life after high school.

The findings by no means suggest that the experience of these three participants, would be the same as those of other students at WCCS. However, it is valuable to recognize the perspectives of the participants, and the crucial role those perspectives could play in how students may be involved in future IEP meetings. According to the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), the number of individuals identified as having ASD has increased at an alarming rate during the last decade and is now one in 44. Given this statistic, the researcher offers the following three considerations for special education teachers and administrators at WCCS.

First, WCCS might consider conducting post IEP interviews to all students with disabilities. The findings of the study indicate that educators and administrators need to talk, but more importantly, they need to listen to students and parents when they articulate their feelings their regarding IEP meetings. One of the participants' prior experiences in a special education program prevented him from engaging in productive yearly IEP meetings at WCCS. The post IEP interviews could be a tool to generate strategies for increasing students' ability to discuss goals, recognizing areas of improvement for educators and administrators, and incorporating specific IEP supports that are beneficial to parents and guardians. Data analysis from these interviews could provide a framework for establishing a mentor program where WCCS students actively involved in the IEP process could support students with limited involvement.

The three seniors in this study all received annual updates and revisions to their IEP during their years at WCCS and even before attending WCCS. That means that the IEP document has been part of their education for many years. Although the three participants were capable of speaking about their disability, overall, they were unsure of

what the IEP truly represented. Therefore, the second consideration is for educators and administrators to implement programming that promotes a student-centered IEP meeting. The literature urges educators and administrators to build upon three areas around student centered planning: developing relationships, using parent and student voices, and providing tools to increase and improve the involvement of students with disabilities in IEP meetings (Cavendish et al., 2017; Hagner, et al., 2014; Sanderson et al., 2021). The findings of the IEP meeting observations indicate that participants were not asked to address standard areas of the IEP meeting, nor did they know how to independently engage in the meetings. Hence, participants relied on case managers to guide the order of the meeting. Using a student-centered approach could shift the focus of the IEP from the adults to the student.

Lastly, there were moments during the interviews and IEP meetings that terms such as LEA, case manager, independent living skills, and AP needed to be explained to the participants. Being unfamiliar with the language could present occasions of disengagement. Specifically, Tony Stark admitted during the first interview, “Big words confuse me.” Therefore, since special education has a language all its own, WCCS might consider using terms that are more easily recognizable to students. An activity could constitute creating a user-friendly interactive digital handbook for students with disabilities that includes side-by-side graphic organizers illustrating official special education terminology and student-friendly language. An accommodation support could also include text to speech and speech to text as a guide throughout the handbook.

The researcher recognizes the study’s small sample size, nevertheless, the findings should serve as a springboard for IEP teams to be proactive in improving student

involvement. The purpose of these considerations is for WCCS to prepare students to be active participants in the planning, preparation, and delivery of their IEP meetings.

Recommendations for Future Research

In conjunction with much of the literature, the results of the study led to four recommendations for future research involving a larger population, voices of educators and parents, the cyber school lens, and follow-up with the current participants. Including a greater number of participants across grade spans and demographics would enhance the research. Although Daljeet (2019) suggested that autism affects males in larger number than females, it is important to recognize the voices of both males and females regarding their involvement in IEP meetings. Second, future research could focus on including the voices of educators and parents. In this study, there were moments when educators and parents expressed important perspectives in the interviews and IEP meetings, but only minimal recognition could be given, as the focus was on students. The insights that both stakeholders bring could add contribute significantly to students' involvement in their IEP meetings. Third, although this study attempted to establish a focus on the perceptions of students specifically in a cyber charter school environment, gaps in the research still exist. Therefore, future studies could explore cyber charter schools in addition to traditional brick-and-mortar schools that offer a cyber program. Lastly, a future study could include follow-up research on the three participants.

As Bolt prepares to enter the workforce and PickleBoy23 prepares to attend LIFE University, WCCS could engage them in a series of probing questions regarding perceptions of how support from their IEP is helping in post-secondary life. Tony Stark will be returning to WCCS for the next school year as a super senior. Given the

circumstances under which he is returning, further exploration of his IEP involvement could be undertaken.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to gain an understanding of how high school seniors with ASD perceive their involvement in their IEP meetings within a cyber charter school environment. The findings of the study were based on a narrative inquiry approach which allowed the researcher to work alongside the participants to gain a deeper perspective on the lived experiences of these three high school seniors with ASD at WCCS, a cyber charter school in the Mid-Atlantic region. Through a triangulation of data consisting of document reviews, two interviews, and IEP meeting observations, the researcher generated themes using in vivo coding and inductive analysis. In addition, the researcher deductively coded based on the three tenets of the SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Through the data collection process, the researcher captured each participants' stories based on their expressions and reflections regarding their involvement in their IEP meetings. As seniors, each participant's narrative reflected who they were as individuals, their ability to use tenets of the SDT, their ability to navigate participation in their IEP meeting, and their independence to articulate strengths and challenges.

Chandroo et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of teachers encouraging students with ASD to attend their IEP meetings, noting that attendance alone is not enough. Educators must prepare and empower students with ASD to take an active role early in their school careers. This will enhance the students' special education program and greatly improve the likelihood of post-secondary success. In conducting this study,

the researcher captured the participants' authentic accounts to ensure their voices were uplifted. The documents, interviews, and observations revealed the essence of each participant's knowledge of their ASD, self-advocacy, goals, impressions of their involvement in IEP meetings, and what they learned throughout the process. These three data sources provided the researcher with some insights into participants' feelings of enthusiasm, interest, and curiosity. Through the interviews and observations, the researcher sought to capture the each participant's human spirit that, according to Chen and Jang (2010), SDT seeks to fulfill.

Finally, this study serves as a call to action for all educators and stakeholders entrusted with providing students with ASD the mechanisms needed to be self-determined but, more importantly, to be prepared. The stories of the three participants confirm the uniqueness of students with ASD and why unique approaches are necessary for to support them.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you for your participation. As a reminder, your participation is strictly voluntary. I want to confirm that you are (state name, grade, and DOB). The purpose of this interview is to ask you, the participant, questions about your experiences participating in your IEP meeting in a cyber school environment. I would like to review the consent form again to see if there are any questions. You, the parent, and parent/guardian are reminded that if at any time you are not comfortable, the researcher will discontinue the interview and you can withdraw from the study. If you, the parent, and parent/guardian agree, a) the interview will recorded and transcribed, b) you, the participant and parent/guardian will have access to the transcript of your interview to ensure accuracy (member checking) and c) you, the participant or parent/guardian may request changes to any of your comments or request that any statements be withdrawn and not used in the data. You, the participant, will be prompted to ask any questions that you might have about the study or the interview before the interview begins. If there are no further questions, do I have your permission to begin the recording?

Interview #1

1. Please tell me about your school experience.

    - How long have you been attending WCCS?
    - Do you have experience in a cyber charter school other than WCCS?

2. Please tell me about your Autism Spectrum Disorder.

3. Please tell me about your Individual Education Program, also known as an IEP.

    - How does your IEP support (or not support) you?
    - What are the goals of your IEP?
    - How do the IEP goals match (or not match) what you think you need?
    - How do you get what you need?
    - Who do you go to for help? Can you give me some examples of how you would ask for help? What happens when you ask for help?

4. Describe the purpose of an IEP meeting.

    - How does the IEP meeting benefit (or not benefit) you?

5. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

Conclusion

Again, I would like to thank you for your participation. As a reminder, the transcripts will be made available for your approval prior to the publication of the research. I would also like to confirm your email address.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for your participation in this second interview. As a reminder, your participation is strictly voluntary. The purpose of the second interview is to ask you some follow up questions about the first interview and about the IEP meeting. You, the parent, and parent/guardian are reminded that if at any time you are not comfortable, the researcher will discontinue the interview and you can withdraw from the study. If you, the parent, and parent/guardian agree, a) the interview will be recorded and transcribed, b) you, the participant and parent/guardian will have access to the transcript of your interview to ensure accuracy (member checking) and c) you, the participant or parent/guardian may request changes to any of your comments or request that any statements be withdrawn and not used in the data. Before we begin, is there anything that you wanted to add from our last meeting together or your IEP meeting? Is there anything new you would like to tell me before we begin? If there are no further questions, do I have your permission to begin the recording?

Interview #2

The researcher may elect to pose follow up questions regarding the first interview of the IEP observation.

1. How do you think your IEP meeting went?

    - How did you feel included (or not included) in the meeting?
    - What did you share during the meeting?
    - How did you help (or not help) to write some of your IEP goals?

2. Please tell me about the IEP goals that were set at your IEP meeting.

    - Why are the IEP goals important (or not important) to you?

3. Did you feel your voice was being heard in the meeting? Explain.

    - How did you prepare (or not prepare) to share your input at the meeting?

4. During the time that you were preparing for your IEP meeting, and now that the meeting is over,

    - What are some things you learned about yourself?
    - What are some things you learned about your case manager?
    - What are some things you learned about your teacher?
    - What are some things you learned about your parents/guardians?

5. What advice would you give to your classmates who participate in IEP meetings virtually?

6. Are there any other technology apps that you would like to have available to you while participating in your virtual IEP meeting? Please explain.

7. Now that your IEP meeting is finished, how do you think you would prepare for another IEP meeting?

Conclusion

Again, I would like to thank you for your participation. As a reminder, the transcripts will be made available for your approval prior to the publication of the research. Finally, I would also like to once again confirm your email address.

Appendix C

Observation Protocol

I will act in the role of a complete observer during the observation. Creswell (2016) defined a complete observer as an individual who is participating without being noticed. The complete observer does not have a speaking part and is solely there to record field notes. The observation will be conducted via zoom. After the facilitator of the meeting introduces the individuals attending the meeting, the facilitator will confirm with the participant and parent/guardian that they agree with me being present at the meeting. Once the participant and parent/guardian give their consent, I will turn off my camera during the observation as to not distract from the IEP meeting.

Observation Checklist Item *Adapted from Royer (2017)*	**Observational Notes**	**Observer Reflections**
Introduce self		
Introduce all team members		
State the purpose of the meeting		
Express personal interest and goals		
Express skills		
Ability to navigate technology virtually		
Close the meeting		