

Transition Planning in Practice: Perspectives of Transition  
Professionals in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania

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Keywords: transition planning, transition coordinators, secondary transition, grounded theory,  
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### **Abstract**

Transition planning is intended to prepare students with disabilities for successful postsecondary outcomes; however, implementation often varies across schools and regions due to differences in resources, collaboration, and local practices. This study examined how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. Guided by constructivist grounded theory, the study explored the perspectives of transition coordinators and consultants responsible for transition services within their educational settings. The primary research question examined how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices in their local contexts.

Data were collected through semi-structured Zoom interviews with sixteen transition professionals who were members of the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice. Data were analyzed using grounded theory procedures including line-by-line coding, focused coding, constant comparison, and memo writing. Findings revealed themes related to coordinating transition systems, the role of the Individualized Education Program in organizing services, tensions between student-centered planning and structural constraints, and challenges navigating family and agency partnerships. Results highlight the importance of strengthening professional supports, interagency collaboration, and regional infrastructure to improve transition outcomes for students with disabilities.

**Keywords:** transition planning, transition professionals, grounded theory, secondary transition, special education

**DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Mike, and my daughters, Ella and Vivi, whose love and encouragement made this journey possible.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction: National and Local Context for Transition Planning**

Transition planning is a mandated component of secondary education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), designed to prepare students with disabilities for postschool life through individualized, coordinated services that address goals in employment, education, and independent living. At the federal level, legislation such as IDEA and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) have established clear expectations for student-centered planning, interagency collaboration, and outcome-focused programming. Despite these policies, students with disabilities continue to experience persistent disparities in postschool outcomes, including lower rates of employment, college attendance, and independent living when compared to their peers without disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2011).

In response, numerous research-based frameworks, such as Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler et al., 2016), the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) (Wehmeyer et al., 2012), and the Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework (Kester et al., 2022), have been developed to improve transition planning. These models emphasize student agency, real-world learning, and systems-level collaboration. While these frameworks offer guidance, the implementation is often inconsistent, particularly in regions facing staffing shortages, uneven training, and limited resources (Morningstar et al., 2012; Plotner & Morningstar, 2016; Test et al., 2009).

The Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, comprising a mix of rural, suburban, and small urban school districts, reflects this national challenge on a localized scale. Although Pennsylvania leads the nation by requiring transition planning to begin at age 14, rather than 16,

implementation across districts remains uneven due to disparities in infrastructure, personnel, and interagency partnerships (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2013; Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network [PaTTAN], 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). The need to better understand how transition planning frameworks are interpreted and enacted in this regional context provides the foundation for the present study.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite strong legislative mandates and evidence-based frameworks, transition planning for students with disabilities is not implemented consistently across Pennsylvania's Capital Area Region. This perspective is informed by the researcher's professional experience as a transition coordinator and by ongoing collaboration with fellow practitioners in the region through the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice, where shared challenges in implementation are regularly discussed. These observations align with broader research highlighting variable transition planning practices across districts (Morningstar et al., 2012; Plotner & Morningstar, 2016). Transition professionals, including coordinators and consultants, are tasked with designing and delivering high-quality services under varying district conditions, resource constraints, and organizational structures. However, little is known about how these professionals experience, interpret, and navigate the complexities of implementation in their local contexts. The disconnect between policy expectations and actual practice, particularly in under-resourced or rural settings, may limit students' access to effective, equitable transition supports. This study seeks to address the gap in understanding by exploring the lived experiences of transition coordinators and consultants in this geographically diverse region.

### **Organizational Context**

The Capital Area Region encompasses districts with wide variability in demographics, funding, and access to external service providers. According to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2023), nearly half the districts in the region are classified as rural, often serving dispersed populations with limited public transportation and fewer community employment opportunities. While some suburban districts within the region benefit from strong partnerships with postsecondary institutions and vocational providers, others operate with minimal infrastructure to support transition services.

Districts often rely on personnel who must balance multiple responsibilities, with transition planning frequently delegated to special educators who may lack dedicated time or specialized training in transition services (Morningstar et al., 2012; Plotner & Morningstar, 2016; Test et al., 2009). Moreover, the presence or absence of interagency collaboration and administrative support greatly influences how transition services are implemented (Brown et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Political pressures to meet compliance indicators (e.g., Indicator 13 and 14) may further complicate efforts to focus on student-centered outcomes, especially in high-accountability environments. Ethical concerns also arise when transition planning defaults to procedural formalities rather than genuine engagement with student goals and family priorities (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2013).

In this context, the professionals charged with implementing transition services must navigate logistical, cultural, and systemic barriers while attempting to adhere to both policy mandates and best practices. Their perspectives offer critical insight into the opportunities and limitations of current service delivery systems across this region.

### **Researcher Background and Positionality**

The researcher is a transition coordinator within a district in Pennsylvania's Capital Area Region and actively participates in the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice. Through this role, the researcher engages regularly with fellow professionals to discuss challenges and strategies related to transition planning implementation. While this study is grounded in participant interviews and existing research, certain contextual observations, such as variability in service delivery, are informed by insights shared through regional collaboration and professional experience. This reflexive stance aligns with Tracy's (2013) emphasis on transparency and sincerity in qualitative inquiry.

### **Existing Research and Conceptual Frameworks**

Numerous studies have explored the components of effective transition planning, highlighting practices such as student-led IEP meetings, work-based learning experiences, and the use of age-appropriate transition assessments (Martin et al., 2007; Test et al., 2009). Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming (2016) organizes these practices into five interrelated domains: Student-Focused Planning, Student Development, Interagency Collaboration, Family Engagement, and Program Structure. This model, along with the evidence-based predictors identified by NSTTAC (Mazzotti et al., 2020; Test et al., 2009), provides a framework for designing services that lead to improved postschool outcomes.

The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) emphasizes student goal-setting and self-advocacy, while the Transition Discoveries Framework (Kester et al., 2022) introduces a participatory, Pennsylvania-specific model grounded in stakeholder voice and local realities. These frameworks offer a conceptual foundation for high-quality transition planning,

but their successful implementation depends on professional capacity, administrative support, and community context.

This study is guided by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), which provides a methodological framework for generating theory based on the lived experiences of participants. Additionally, Tracy's (2013) iterative qualitative research model allows for flexible, cyclical movement between data collection, analysis, and theoretical development. Together, these approaches support an in-depth exploration of how transition professionals in the Capital Area Region understand and enact their responsibilities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study seeks to understand how transition coordinators and consultants interpret best practices, navigate barriers, and adapt services within their local contexts.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Primary Research Question**

How do transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania?

#### **Research Sub-Questions**

1. What do transition professionals identify as best practices that support successful postschool outcomes?
2. What barriers and challenges do transition professionals encounter when implementing transition services?

3. In what ways do transition professionals believe the programs and systems in which they work can be made better?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the field of secondary transition by centering the voices of professionals directly responsible for implementation, a perspective often overlooked in statewide or national evaluations. By examining local practice through the lens of those working within the system, the study offers insights into both effective strategies and systemic barriers. Findings may inform policy revisions, professional development, and technical assistance efforts aimed at improving equity and consistency in transition service delivery.

Furthermore, this study addresses important gaps in the current research by focusing on how transition planning is implemented at the regional level, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. It also highlights the perspectives of transition coordinators and consultants, key professionals whose voices are often overlooked in empirical studies (Plotner & Morningstar, 2016; Whittenburg et al., 2024). The Capital Area Region reflects many of the broader challenges seen across the field, making it an important setting for examining how transition planning is implemented in practice. This aligns with Tracy's (2013) emphasis on pursuing a worthwhile topic that addresses pressing social and professional concerns in a meaningful way.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited to transition coordinators and consultants who are members of the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice in Pennsylvania's Capital Area Region. The exclusion of perspectives from students, families, and administrators may narrow the range of insights. Additionally, the small, regionally specific sample limits the generalizability of findings. However, the results may offer transferable insights for other regions

with similar demographics, organizational structures, or resource challenges. Another limitation involves the researcher's dual role as a transition coordinator in the region, which may introduce bias. To mitigate this, the study incorporates reflexivity practices, including memo writing and journaling, as well as member checking, to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in participants' intended meanings rather than researcher assumptions. This reflexive practice contributes to the sincerity and transparency that Tracy (2013) identifies as essential to rigorous qualitative inquiry.

### **Overview of Study Approach**

This qualitative study employs Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory to generate a data-driven understanding of how transition planning is implemented across school districts in the Capital Area Region. Semi-structured interviews with transition coordinators and consultants will form the basis of analysis, supported by iterative coding, memo writing, and member checking. Tracy's (2013) model of rigorous, reflexive qualitative research further guides the analytic process, emphasizing sincerity, credibility, and the iterative nature of theory-building based on emerging participant narratives.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

- **Transition Planning:** A coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability, designed to facilitate movement from school to postschool activities, including postsecondary education, employment, and independent living (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004, §300.43).
- **Transition Coordinator/Consultant:** Professionals responsible for designing, delivering, and monitoring transition services under IDEA, often serving as the point of

contact for interagency collaboration, IEP development, and service implementation (Plotner & Morningstar, 2016).

- **CART:** The Capital Area Regional Transition Community of Practice is a regional professional learning network that supports transition service coordination through collaboration, resource-sharing, and peer engagement in Central Pennsylvania (Kester et al., 2022).
- **Constructivist Grounded Theory:** A qualitative methodology that emphasizes co-constructed meaning, iterative analysis, and researcher reflexivity while grounding theory in participant experiences (Charmaz, 2014).
- **SDLMI (Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction):** A research-based instructional model that supports students in setting goals, solving problems, and increasing self-determination by guiding them through a structured, multi-phase decision-making process (Shogren et al., 2015; Wehmeyer et al., 2012).

### Chapter Summary and Overview

Chapter 1 establishes the national and regional significance of effective transition planning for students with disabilities and introduced a localized problem: the inconsistent implementation of services across Pennsylvania’s Capital Area Region. The chapter outlines the study’s purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and methodological approach, including the use of constructivist grounded theory. It also describes the potential impact of the research and acknowledged key limitations related to scope and positionality.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature, synthesizing federal and state mandates, evidence-based transition frameworks such as Kohler’s Taxonomy and SDLMI,

and current research on implementation challenges. It highlights both national trends and region-specific concerns that underscore the relevance and urgency of the present study.

Chapter 3 describes the qualitative methodology used in the study, including participant selection, data collection procedures, and the analytic strategies informed by Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory and Tracy's iterative research model. The chapter also addresses issues of trustworthiness, researcher reflexivity, and ethical considerations.

Chapters 4 and 5 will present and interpret the study's findings. Chapter 4 will include a rich description of emergent themes grounded in participant perspectives, supported by direct quotations. Chapter 5 will offer a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature, draw conclusions, and propose implications for practice, policy, and future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Transition planning is a critical element of secondary education for students with disabilities, intended to facilitate their successful transition from school to adult life. This literature review synthesizes current research on transition planning practices. It explores a range of topics, including evidence-based frameworks, predictors of postschool success, implementation challenges, and assessment methods. Grounded in federal and state mandates, theoretical models, and practitioner-oriented studies, this chapter establishes a foundation for understanding high-quality transition planning. The insights gained will inform the current study, which explores how these practices are interpreted and implemented by transition professionals in the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania.

At the federal level, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates the inclusion of transition services in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) by age 16. These services must be based on age-appropriate transition assessments and reflect the student's strengths, preferences, and interests (IDEA, 2004, §300.320[b]). Transition goals must address key postsecondary domains: education or training, employment, and, when appropriate, independent living (Martin et al., 2007). Some states have enacted more proactive timelines; notably, Pennsylvania, which requires that transition planning begin at age 14 (22 Pa. Code §14.131), providing earlier opportunities for alignment with long-term outcomes. Additionally, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) emphasizes the importance of competitive integrated employment and strengthens collaboration between education and vocational rehabilitation systems, reinforcing the need for coordinated planning during secondary transition.

In 2004 with the reauthorization of IDEA came a significant shift from procedural compliance toward a results-driven accountability model. This change is represented by Indicators 13 and 14, which states are required to report annually to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) as part of their State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2023), Indicator 13 evaluates whether transition components (such as measurable postsecondary goals, age-appropriate transition assessments, and coordinated services) are appropriately documented in students' IEPs; while Indicator 14 measures the percentage of youth with IEPs who, within one year of exiting high school, are engaged in postsecondary education, training, or competitive employment. These indicators reflect a broader federal emphasis on improving outcomes and ensuring meaningful transition planning. Despite this intended shift towards outcomes, research suggests a persistent 'culture of compliance' often overshadows meaningful results (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2013, p. 163). Findings from their study revealed that high compliance with Indicator 13 did not consistently correlate with improved employment outcomes, though it was more strongly linked to postsecondary persistence (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2013, p. 165). These insights emphasize the need to move beyond documentation and focus on the quality and effectiveness of transition planning processes. Effective transition planning requires more than meeting legal mandates. It demands individualized assessments, student-centered goal setting, coordinated interagency collaboration, and sustained engagement from families, educators, and service providers (Martin et al., 2007). Yet research consistently highlights critical implementation challenges. IEPs often contain vague or generic goals, limited interagency input, and weak alignment with assessment data (Martin et al., 2007; Test et al., 2009). These shortcomings contribute to ongoing disparities in postschool outcomes, with students with

disabilities who are significantly less likely than their peers to be employed, attend college, or live independently (Newman et al., 2011).

To address these gaps, several research-based frameworks have emerged to guide high-quality transition planning. Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming and the evidence-based predictors identified by the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) offer widely accepted models for structuring effective services (Kohler et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009). Building on these foundations, the Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework (Kester et al., 2022) was developed using feedback from over 500 Pennsylvania-based youth, families, and professionals. This participatory model prioritizes indicators such as social belonging, self-advocacy, and real-world learning experiences- areas identified by stakeholders as essential for meaningful transition outcomes.

While these models offer valuable guidance, their implementation remains uneven across schools and districts. Barriers such as limited professional development, inconsistent interagency collaboration, and low family engagement continue to hinder progress (Brown et al., 2021; Cavendish & Connor, 2017; Snell-Rood et al., 2020). These findings suggest that even the most well-designed frameworks require localized strategies to ensure fidelity and equity in implementation.

One critical element that connects these frameworks to daily practice is assessment. Assessment practices serve as the foundation for implementing high-quality transition planning, as they directly inform the development of individualized goals and services. According to Martin et al. (2007), effective planning must be rooted in a comprehensive understanding of a student's academic, vocational, social, and independent living competencies. This holistic understanding is best achieved through a blend of formal assessments (e.g., standardized

measures), informal observations, and person-centered methods such as interviews, ecological inventories, and transition-focused planning tools (Sitlington et al., 2010).

These assessment approaches are essential not only for aligning goals with student strengths but also for ensuring equity in expectations and supports. Hughes et al. (2023), in a longitudinal review of IEPs for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), identified troubling disparities: students without intellectual disabilities were more likely to have goals tied to competitive employment or higher education, while those with intellectual disabilities often received vague or lower-expectation goals. Only 41% of IEPs reviewed included postsecondary living goals, and no Black students had documented access to school-based mental health services. These findings demonstrate how inadequate or inequitable assessments can reinforce systemic disparities in planning and outcomes. As Test et al. (2009) argue, meaningful transition planning requires that assessments serve not merely as procedural checkboxes, but as tools for elevating student voice, setting ambitious goals, and guiding coordinated services. Without high-quality assessment data, even the most well-designed frameworks may fail to generate impactful, student-centered outcomes.

Even when supported by strong assessment practices and nationally recognized models, there remains a lack of clarity around how to operationalize these approaches at the local level. Variation in staffing, district resources, student demographics, and community partnerships contributes to inconsistencies in implementation. This reality reinforces the need for regionally focused research on how transition planning frameworks are interpreted and applied in diverse educational settings.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

To build a stronger understanding of what constitutes effective transition planning, this section provides a closer examination of several widely used frameworks: Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler et al., 2016), the evidence-based predictors established by NSTTAC (Test et al., 2009), the Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework (Kester, et al., 2022), and the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) (Wehmeyer et al., 2023). While this study does not directly evaluate the implementation of these models, understanding their structure, priorities, and influence in the field is essential to contextualize the transition planning practices that will be examined in the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania. Although limited data currently exist on how these frameworks are applied in that region, reviewing their foundational principles offers critical insight into best practices and informs the present study’s regional focus.

#### **Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0**

One of the most widely recognized models in the field is Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016). Building upon its 1996 predecessor, this taxonomy identifies five interrelated domains that frame best practices in transition-focused education: Student-Focused Planning, Student Development, Interagency Collaboration, Family Engagement, and Program Structure. Each domain includes evidence-based practices that allow educators and service providers to organize, evaluate, and improve their transition programming. Notably, the taxonomy positions transition planning as a foundational aspect of education rather than a supplemental service, stating that “...transition planning is the fundamental basis of education that guides development of students’ educational programs... rather than an ‘add-on’ activity” (Kohler et al., 2016, p. 2). For instance, the Student-Focused Planning domain

emphasizes culturally relevant and person-centered planning strategies such as PATH and MAPS, as well as student engagement through age-appropriate transition assessments. Similarly, the Family Engagement domain stresses cultural responsiveness, empowerment, and preparation to support successful outcomes.

### **Evidence-Based Predictors of Post-School Success**

Complementing Kohler's taxonomy is a growing body of research identifying in-school predictors strongly associated with improved postschool outcomes. Test et al. (2009), and later Mazzotti et al. (2015, 2020), conducted comprehensive reviews that validated predictors such as paid work experience, participation in general education, self-determination, and family involvement. In their updated review, Mazzotti et al. (2020) confirmed the validity of these factors and introduced new predictors including goal setting, youth autonomy, parent expectations, and travel skills, each of which aligns closely with the domains in Kohler's taxonomy. These predictors serve not only as a research-based foundation but also as practical planning tools that help educators and transition teams focus on high-leverage activities. As Mazzotti et al. (2015) noted, the objective is to "...identify in-school secondary transition experiences that predicted positive post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities" (p. 197), providing a framework for targeting resources where they will have the greatest impact.

### **Integration of Frameworks in Practice**

Despite the alignment between Kohler's Taxonomy and the validated predictors, implementation in practice often remains fragmented. Test et al. (2015) observed that "...although schools are charged with the job of delivering EBPs, a research to practice gap exists in special education... and, as a result, many teachers are either not using research-based instructional practices or are using practices that have marginal effects..." (p. 256). Similarly,

Plotner et al. (2015) found that many transition professionals report limited preparation in evidence-based practices (EBPs), with fewer than half of teacher preparation programs offering dedicated coursework on transition planning. This disconnect between evidence and execution is especially relevant in regions like Central Pennsylvania, where variation in district resources, staffing, and training access may hinder consistent application. As Mazzotti et al. (2020) emphasized, "...many youth with disabilities are not accessing the necessary transition-related instruction and supports in school to be successful post-school" (p. 48). These findings highlight the importance of professional development, interagency coordination, and strategic planning to bring research into meaningful practice.

### **Transition Discoveries Framework**

Extending these existing frameworks, the *Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework* (Kester et al., 2022) was developed through a participatory action research model involving more than 500 youth, family members, and professionals across Pennsylvania. This framework not only reinforces established predictors and best practices but also elevates youth and family voice as critical indicators of quality transition planning. It emphasizes components such as youth development, real-world experiences, and inclusive planning processes. According to Kester et al. (2022), students valued "...being socially accepted with meaningful friendships and relationships," while families emphasized the need for "...self-awareness and independence" (p. 38). Kester et al. (2022) concluded that the framework "...may represent a novel expansion of transition practices at the youth/family and community levels" (p. 39), providing educators and administrators with a student-centered rubric for evaluating and improving services. Given that the Transition Discoveries model was developed with significant input from stakeholders across Pennsylvania, it offers unique relevance to transition planning in the Capital Area Region. It also

provides a locally informed structure that school districts and transition professionals in this region can use to assess fidelity and impact. By integrating this framework into district-level planning, professionals can better align services with the values and needs of students and families, helping to close the gap between policy and meaningful practice.

### **Self-Determination Theory and SDLMI**

Building upon the foundational frameworks already discussed, another key model guiding high-quality transition planning is the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI). Developed by Wehmeyer and colleagues, the SDLMI fosters student independence and goal-directed behavior through a structured, multi-phase process. It guides students to set goals, create action plans, and evaluate their progress, skills essential for self-advocacy, independence, and long-term postschool success.

Research on the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) has shown that students who receive instruction in this model tend to demonstrate increased engagement in the IEP process and improved outcomes in areas such as employment and independent living, particularly when self-determination skills are explicitly taught and supported (NTACT, 2020; Shogren et al., 2015; Wehmeyer et al., 2012). These outcomes align with several validated predictors of success, including self-determination, decision-making, and goal setting (Mazzotti et al., 2020; Test et al., 2009). The SDLMI also directly supports the Student-Focused Planning and Student Development domains of Kohler's Taxonomy (Kohler et al., 2016), reinforcing the model's theoretical integration with broader transition planning frameworks.

Despite these strengths, implementation of SDLMI is not without challenges. Plotner et al. (2015) and Test et al. (2015) found that schools often struggle with consistent training, time constraints, and curricular alignment, which can limit the depth and fidelity of SDLMI

implementation. These concerns are particularly relevant in under-resourced or rural districts where staff may juggle multiple responsibilities without access to professional development. Moreover, while SDLMI emphasizes student agency, it may be less effective for students with complex communication needs unless paired with appropriate supports (e.g., augmentative communication tools or intensive coaching). When viewed in combination with other frameworks, such as Kohler's Taxonomy, the evidence-based predictors, and the Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework, the SDLMI contributes to a comprehensive, student-centered transition system. However, the model's success relies heavily on trained personnel, administrative support, and cultural responsiveness in practice.

In summary, the SDLMI offers a powerful tool for promoting student engagement and self-determination, but its success depends on thoughtful, well-supported implementation. More research is needed to understand how SDLMI can be adapted for diverse learners across varying school contexts, especially in regions like Central Pennsylvania where professional development and staffing resources are unevenly distributed.

### **Key Components of Effective Transition Planning**

Having established the theoretical and conceptual foundations that guide transition planning, it is equally important to examine how these frameworks translate into key components of effective practice. Transition planning is most impactful when it incorporates research-based elements that are responsive to students' individual needs, the local context, and their long-term postsecondary goals. Frameworks such as Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 and the evidence-based predictors identified by the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) offer structured approaches for evaluating and implementing these practices (Kohler et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009). More recently, the Transition Discoveries

Quality Indicator Framework (Kester et al., 2022) has further contributed to the field by elevating student and family perspectives as essential indicators of quality. This participatory model centers youth voice in identifying the most relevant and meaningful supports for transition-aged students. Despite the availability of these robust models, implementation of their core components remains inconsistent, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas (Brown et al., 2023; Snell-Rood et al., 2020). Challenges such as limited staffing, inadequate access to professional development, and variable community partnerships often affect how effectively schools are able to embed these research-informed practices into transition planning (Carter et al., 2020; Cavendish & Connor, 2017). In the following subsections, each key domain of effective transition planning is examined: Student-Focused Planning, Student Development, Interagency Collaboration, Family Engagement, and Program Structure, with particular attention to the strategies supported by current literature and the barriers commonly encountered in diverse educational contexts.

### **Student-focused Planning**

Student-focused planning ensures that transition services align with each student's strengths, preferences, and postsecondary aspirations. Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 emphasizes this domain through practices such as person-centered planning, the use of age-appropriate assessments, and active student participation in IEP meetings (Kohler et al., 2016). These strategies are intended to elevate student voice and promote ownership of the transition process.

Despite the emphasis in federal and state policy, meaningful student involvement in transition planning remains inconsistent. Cavendish and Connor (2017) found that although students may be physically present at IEP meetings, few are equipped with the skills or

confidence to meaningfully contribute. They advocate for embedding self-advocacy instruction and preparatory activities within the school curriculum to foster active engagement.

Similarly, Snell-Rood et al. (2020) reported that poor communication practices, particularly in working with students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), can lead to their marginalization in planning decisions. To address this, instructional models like the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) offer a promising approach. When implemented with fidelity, SDLMI has been shown to increase students' self-determination and ownership over their transition goals (Wehmeyer et al., 2023). Martin et al. (2007) further underscore the importance of authentic assessments, including interviews, performance-based tasks, and community-based experiences, to guide goal development that is personalized and relevant to students' real-life contexts.

Findings from the Transition Discoveries Framework affirm these conclusions. In a statewide participatory study, youth emphasized the value of "...individualized and person-centered supports that help them plan for their future" (Kester et al., 2022, p. 38). The framework specifically highlights the need for student-led meetings and structured self-advocacy instruction as core practices in effective transition planning. For districts across the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, where student demographics and resource availability can vary widely, prioritizing student-focused planning is essential. When students are equipped to lead and meaningfully participate in the development of their transition plans, the resulting goals are more likely to reflect authentic aspirations and support the development of future-ready skills.

Student-focused planning lies at the heart of effective transition services. When students are empowered to express their goals, participate in planning meetings, and shape their own future pathways, the resulting plans are more individualized, relevant, and motivating (Carter et

al., 2020; Gaumer Erickson et al., 2013; Shogren et al., 2015). Collectively, Kohler's Taxonomy, SDLMI, and Transition Discoveries reinforce this emphasis on student agency. However, widespread variability in implementation, particularly in underserved districts, highlights the need for structured instruction in self-advocacy, clearer IEP facilitation, and ongoing training for educators. Ensuring student voice is authentically embedded in planning processes remains a cornerstone of equitable transition practices.

### **Student Development**

Student development within transition planning refers to the intentional instruction of academic, employment, social, and independent living skills. These competencies form the foundation for successful adult outcomes and must be tailored to each student's goals and abilities. Among the most consistently supported predictors of adult employment is participation in paid work experiences during high school (Test et al., 2009). Opportunities such as supported internships, job coaching, and vocational education not only build essential workplace competencies but also help students internalize expectations related to responsibility, communication, and performance.

Programs like Project SEARCH, which integrate classroom instruction with immersive, real-world work experiences, have demonstrated strong employment outcomes when implemented with fidelity (Wehman, 2013). However, access to these programs varies widely. Zhang et al. (2023) highlighted the value of such models while cautioning that their availability is often limited, especially in rural and under-resourced districts. In the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, rural communities may face added barriers to program implementation, including transportation constraints, limited employer partnerships, and staffing shortages. Supporting this concern, Whittenburg et al. (2024) reported significant disparities in the delivery

of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) across both states and individual communities. Students in rural settings frequently have fewer opportunities to engage in work-based learning due to logistical and personnel limitations, leading to reduced exposure to critical skill-building experiences.

Reinforcing these findings, Kester et al. (2022) noted that youth researchers identified “...real-world experiences, such as community-based instruction and employment” as essential components of high-quality transition services (p. 36). These opportunities not only help students acquire practical, transferable skills, but also contribute to increased self-confidence and independence. By embedding work-based learning and community instruction into the transition planning process, schools can ensure that services are not only theoretically sound but also directly aligned with students’ postsecondary aspirations and the realities of adult life.

The development of academic, vocational, social, and independent living skills is central to preparing students for postschool success. Paid work experiences, community-based instruction, and programs like Project SEARCH provide practical, real-world learning that aligns with validated predictors of successful outcomes. Nevertheless, access to these opportunities is uneven, especially in rural districts with transportation limitations or staffing shortages. While frameworks offer guidance, local implementation must consider the logistical barriers that limit exposure to high-quality skill-building. Strengthening these opportunities is essential to bridging the gap between aspiration and actual postschool achievement.

### **Interagency collaboration**

Interagency Collaboration is essential for effective transition planning, as it ensures coordination among schools, vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors, employers, postsecondary institutions, and adult service providers. These partnerships play a critical role in

providing consistent services and support as students with disabilities move from the school system into adult life.

Kohler et al. (2016) identify interagency collaboration as one of the five foundational domains in the *Taxonomy for Transition Programming*, advocating for the development of formal memoranda of understanding (MOUs), clearly defined roles, and shared accountability to improve outcomes. These strategies aim to build structured, sustainable coordination across agencies and systems.

Despite this guidance, collaboration often remains fragmented in practice. Zhang et al. (2023) found that both VR counselors and educators recognize the value of collaboration but face barriers such as inconsistent communication, misaligned service timelines, and unclear expectations. Similarly, Brown et al. (2023) reported that many school leaders feel underprepared to initiate or sustain effective interagency partnerships, which can limit the quality and reach of transition services.

Challenges related to transition planning can be amplified by geographic and staffing constraints, particularly in rural districts. Limited formal partnerships and inconsistent interagency communication may result in reduced access to essential services and uneven transition outcomes across schools and communities. Findings from Kester et al. (2022) reinforce the need for coordinated collaboration. Their Transition Discoveries study highlights that "...youth, families, and professionals must work together to design individualized transition supports" (p. 34). The framework promotes joint efforts across systems and emphasizes the importance of building local partnerships that offer students meaningful community-based experiences. Strengthening these connections is critical for overcoming service fragmentation

and ensuring that all students, regardless of district or disability, have access to high-quality, individualized transition supports.

Effective transition planning requires robust collaboration across schools, agencies, and service providers. Though widely promoted in research and policy, interagency coordination often remains fragmented due to logistical, structural, and relational challenges. Rural and suburban districts face unique constraints, including inconsistent timelines, unclear role expectations, and limited formal agreements. Frameworks like Transition Discoveries and Kohler's Taxonomy outline best practices, but translating these into consistent implementation requires dedicated leadership, shared accountability, and mutual trust among partners. Building and sustaining these partnerships is a critical step toward delivering seamless, student-centered transition services.

### **Family engagement**

Family engagement is a foundational element of effective transition planning, as it contributes to stronger postsecondary outcomes and ensures that transition goals reflect the student's cultural and familial values. Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 identifies family involvement as one of its five key domains, underscoring the importance of collaboration between schools and families throughout the transition process (Kohler et al., 2016). Despite its significance, meaningful family engagement is frequently hindered by structural and logistical barriers, such as scheduling conflicts, limited access to transportation, and a lack of translated or culturally appropriate materials (Cavendish & Connor, 2017).

To support equitable engagement, researchers have emphasized the need for culturally responsive practices. Cavendish and Connor (2017) and Landmark et al. (2007), both advocate for strategies such as early outreach, the use of interpreters, family liaisons, and pre-meeting

orientation or training to help parents understand the transition planning process. When schools foster trust, maintain open lines of communication, and invite families to participate as equal partners, transition plans are more likely to reflect shared priorities and long-term goals.

The Transition Discoveries framework developed by Kester et al. (2022) reinforces these findings, highlighting that families value “...having access to information, tools, and collaborative planning opportunities that prepare them to support their child’s transition” (p. 38). The framework calls for inclusive planning practices that elevate family voice, eliminate participation barriers, and recognize families as key contributors to the development of meaningful, individualized transition goals. These approaches are essential for creating student-centered plans that are informed by the knowledge, hopes, and values of those who know the student best.

Families play a vital role in shaping transition outcomes, yet engagement remains inconsistent across regions and subgroups. Barriers such as language access, scheduling, and cultural mismatch often limit meaningful participation. Research-based strategies, including early outreach, translated materials, and pre-meeting supports, can help bridge these gaps. Transition Discoveries reinforces that families must be active partners in planning, not passive participants. To ensure inclusive and effective engagement, schools must adopt culturally responsive practices and commit to systemic structures that foster trust, accessibility, and collaboration.

### **Program Structure**

Program structure refers to the systemic organization of transition services within a school or district, including leadership engagement, professional development, data-driven evaluation, and curriculum alignment with postsecondary outcomes. When structured

intentionally, using research-based frameworks like Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming, transition programs are better positioned to support positive student outcomes (Kohler et al., 2016).

Test et al. (2015) emphasize that strong administrative leadership is foundational to implementation fidelity. However, Whittenburg et al. (2024) identified substantial variability in how Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) are delivered across districts. Some rely heavily on community-based providers, others on school personnel, and many lack staff dedicated solely to transition coordination. Brown et al. (2023) similarly found that school administrators often lack familiarity with key transition-related indicators or IDEA compliance mandates, limiting their capacity to support sustainable program growth.

Kester et al. (2022) offer an innovative, youth- and family-informed perspective to evaluating program structure through the Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework. This tool supports schools in assessing their practices based on youth-identified priorities and best practices. According to the framework, high-quality programs offer "...consistent opportunities for youth to explore interests, build relationships, and experience inclusive community settings" (Kester et al., 2022, p. 36). This student-centered lens encourages districts to ground their transition infrastructure in authentic experiences and community integration.

Addressing gaps in program structure, particularly in under-resourced or rural regions like the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, requires coordinated support at both the local and state levels. Key areas include targeted funding, expanded transition-focused staffing, integrated data systems, and routine evaluation of student outcomes. Additionally, alignment across general education, special education, and career and technical education (CTE) staff is

critical to ensure unified understanding and implementation of transition services throughout the school system.

Program structure determines the extent to which transition planning can be implemented with fidelity and sustained over time. Leadership commitment, staff training, aligned curricula, and performance monitoring are all critical components of a strong system. However, as seen in Central Pennsylvania and beyond, program infrastructure often varies widely due to staffing shortages, unclear roles, or fragmented supports. Tools like the Transition Discoveries Framework provide valuable guidance by incorporating youth and family perspectives into program evaluation. To ensure that every student has access to high-quality transition planning, schools must prioritize systemic coordination, resource investment, and continuous quality improvement.

While these frameworks and practices provide a clear blueprint for high-quality transition planning, the reality in many districts, especially those with limited resources or capacity, is far more complex. The following section explores the barriers and inconsistencies that continue to undermine implementation efforts, with particular attention to the unique challenges faced in regions like the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania.

### **Barriers and Inconsistencies in Implementation**

Despite a strong foundation of federal mandates, state policies, and research-based frameworks, the implementation of transition planning remains uneven across schools and districts. While models such as Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler et al., 2016), the Transition Discoveries Framework (Kester et al., 2022), and the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (Wehmeyer et al., 2023) offer clear guidance, numerous studies

have documented systemic, organizational, and interpersonal barriers that hinder effective delivery of services (Brown et al., 2023; Test et al., 2015).

These implementation challenges are often shaped by local context. In particular, regional disparities in funding, access to qualified personnel, and the strength of interagency collaboration can significantly influence the quality and consistency of transition programming. Such issues are especially pronounced in geographically diverse areas like the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, where rural and under-resourced districts may lack the infrastructure and supports necessary to deliver comprehensive, student-centered transition services.

### **Gaps Between Policy and Practice**

Gaps between transition policy and practice continue to undermine the effectiveness of services for students with disabilities. Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) outline specific requirements for individualized and outcome-driven transition planning, the real-world implementation often falls short. Snell-Rood et al. (2020) found that transition goals included in IEPs were frequently vague, outdated, or disconnected from measurable objectives. Common examples included generic phrases like “the student will be employed” or “the student will attend college,” without accompanying services, timelines, or progress benchmarks.

Brown et al. (2023) similarly reported that many administrators lack awareness of their district’s performance on Indicator 13 and Indicator 14, federal metrics designed to monitor transition service delivery and postschool outcomes. This lack of oversight can lead to perfunctory compliance rather than meaningful implementation. Research conducted by Kester et al. (2022) further underscores these inconsistencies across Pennsylvania. Youth and family

stakeholders described wide variation in the quality of planning, with one youth researcher stating, "...we don't want to be handed a plan, we want to help create it" (Kester et al., 2022, p. 36). Such insights emphasize the divide between technical compliance and authentic student engagement.

In the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, this gap is often exacerbated by structural issues such as limited time, unclear staff roles, and the absence of regionally validated implementation models. To address these challenges, the Transition Discoveries framework offers a student-driven and locally informed approach to improving the consistency and effectiveness of transition planning (Kester et al., 2022).

### **Inconsistent Student and Family Involvement**

Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) emphasizes student and family participation in transition planning, involvement is often superficial or tokenistic in practice. Cavendish and Connor (2017) found that while students with disabilities may attend their IEP meetings, they are rarely given an active or meaningful role. This is particularly evident in rural or high-need districts, where students may not receive explicit instruction in self-determination or goal-setting skills that are necessary to participate effectively in planning.

Family engagement also suffers due to logistical, cultural, and structural barriers. In Central Pennsylvania, many families live in rural areas where transportation is limited, broadband internet is unreliable, and translated materials or interpreters are often unavailable. These constraints can make it difficult for families to attend meetings or engage in planning activities. Furthermore, educators often lack training in culturally responsive practices that are

essential for building trust and encouraging family involvement, particularly with families from diverse linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Landmark et al., 2007).

Kester et al. (2022) reported that students and families frequently described feeling excluded from decision-making, noting that plans were often developed without their input. According to the Transition Discoveries framework, "...family members must be seen as key contributors, not passive recipients of information" (Kester et al., 2022, p. 38). Ensuring meaningful involvement requires schools to dismantle access barriers and intentionally foster a collaborative culture, one that views students and families as essential partners in shaping postsecondary goals and services.

### **Insufficient Interagency Collaboration**

Interagency collaboration is a critical feature of effective transition planning, involving coordinated efforts among schools, vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies, mental health providers, community service organizations, and postsecondary institutions. Despite its importance, research consistently finds that these partnerships are often fragmented or underdeveloped (Kohler et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2023). Kohler et al. (2016) identify interagency collaboration as one of the five essential domains of transition programming, emphasizing the use of memoranda of understanding (MOUs), defined roles, and shared responsibilities to support continuity of services.

In the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, rural districts may benefit from close-knit, informal relationships with local agencies but often lack formal structures such as MOUs or dedicated interagency teams. Conversely, urban and suburban districts may struggle with high turnover among providers or bureaucratic complexity that disrupts coordination. Brown et al. (2023) also found that many school administrators feel underprepared to facilitate

such partnerships, pointing to the need for stronger professional development and clearer expectations around transition-related roles. Additionally, Zhang et al. (2023) reported persistent barriers to effective collaboration, including scheduling conflicts, unclear role definitions, and mismatched service timelines between educators and agency staff.

The Transition Discoveries framework also identifies interagency collaboration as a key quality indicator. Kester et al. (2022) found that youth and families emphasized the importance of seamless coordination, stating they “...want adults to work together so there are no gaps in supports” (p. 37). Their findings reinforce the need for schools and community agencies to establish transparent, consistent communication practices that center student and family priorities. Test et al. (2015) argue that improving interagency collaboration requires systems-level solutions, including joint training, role alignment, and sustained leadership support to promote effective partnerships and service continuity.

### **Lack of Professional Preparation and Training**

Transition planning is a specialized area of educational practice that requires comprehensive knowledge of age-appropriate assessment tools, federal and state legal mandates, instructional strategies, and available postsecondary services. Despite the complexity of these responsibilities, many educators and administrators report limited preparation to address the multifaceted demands of transition planning effectively. Brown et al. (2023) found that school leaders were often unaware of mandated or recommended evidence-based practices and lacked formal training in evaluating the quality of transition-related IEP components.

In the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, these challenges are exacerbated by persistent staffing shortages and resource constraints. Special educators often juggle multiple responsibilities, including academic instruction, behavioral support, IEP compliance, and

transition planning. This multitasking can result in the deprioritization of transition efforts or a continued reliance on outdated strategies that lack alignment with current best practices (Plotner & Morningstar, 2016). Although professional development opportunities are available through the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) and Intermediate Units (IUs) (PaTTAN, n.d.), rural districts may face greater challenges accessing these offerings (Glover et al., 2016). These challenges include “...providing effective professional development (PD) opportunities for teachers, including geographic isolation, limited availability of PD resources, and the lack of available staff to support PD efforts (e.g., coaches, consultants, substitute teachers for teacher released time)” (Glover et al., 2016, p. 1).

Research suggests that when professional development is responsive to student-defined indicators of quality, educators are better equipped to implement meaningful transition practices. Kester et al. (2022), through the Transition Discoveries framework, emphasize that professional learning is most effective when it incorporates the lived experiences, needs, and aspirations of students and families. Trainings that emphasize authentic engagement over compliance metrics are more likely to result in individualized, student-centered transition plans. Moreover, Carter et al. (2020) highlight that sustained, collaborative professional development that includes interagency partners can significantly improve postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

To address these ongoing issues, it is critical to increase investment in transition-specific educator preparation and to embed transition planning competencies within both pre-service teacher education and ongoing in-service training. This is particularly essential in geographically diverse regions like Central Pennsylvania, where the uneven availability of training and support services contributes to disparities in the quality and fidelity of transition planning across districts.

### **Structural and Resource-Based Limitations**

Even when schools are committed to high-quality transition planning, structural and resource-related barriers frequently hinder effective implementation. These barriers often include:

- Lack of dedicated transition coordinators (Test et al., 2020)
- High caseloads for special education teachers (Glover et al., 2016)
- Limited transportation for community-based instruction (Kucharczyk et al., 2021)
- Inadequate access to job sites for work-based learning (Kucharczyk et al., 2021)
- Insufficient funding for job coaches and postsecondary readiness programs (Test et al., 2020; Glover et al., 2016)

Whittenburg et al. (2024) emphasized that the implementation of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) is not only inconsistent across states but also within them. These inconsistencies are particularly evident in rural and under-resourced regions, where some districts maintain strong partnerships with local employers and community colleges, while others struggle to offer even foundational workplace readiness activities (Kucharczyk et al., 2021). As Kucharczyk et al. (2021) noted, rural communities experience substantial variability in transition opportunities, often requiring teams to "...be creative in how they support students with disabilities in these communities and fluent in the use of practices known to effectively create opportunities for youth" (p. 124). Such disparities reflect broader inequities in funding, staffing, and administrative support that often go unaddressed. The Transition Discoveries framework provides tools to assess these structural limitations through the lens of student and family experience. Youth participants noted that many students "...don't get enough chances to try things in the real world before graduation" (Kester et al. 2022, p. 36). Addressing these gaps

requires more than just additional resources; it necessitates a systemic shift in how schools define and measure high-quality transition programming. Rather than focusing solely on procedural compliance, districts must prioritize student-centered experiences and outcomes that reflect readiness for life beyond high school.

### **Regional and State-Level Context: Pennsylvania**

To better understand how these implementation challenges unfold in real-world contexts, it is critical to examine how state-level policies and regional characteristics shape the delivery of transition services. Pennsylvania presents a compelling case for understanding how state-level policies and regional characteristics influence the implementation of secondary transition services. The state has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to inclusive education and early intervention through progressive legislation, cross-agency partnerships, and statewide initiatives that aim to support students with disabilities as they prepare for life after high school (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2013; Kohler et al., 2016).

#### **Early Mandates and Legislative Initiatives**

Among Pennsylvania's most significant policy advances is the mandate that transition planning begin at age 14, two years earlier than the federal requirement established in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). This early-start policy is grounded in research demonstrating that younger students benefit from longer-term engagement in career exploration, self-determination instruction, and the development of independent living skills (Martin et al., 2007; Test et al., 2009). Another notable initiative is Act 26 of 2016, which formalized collaboration between local education agencies and the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) to ensure students receive Pre-Employment Transition Services

(Pre-ETS), including job exploration, postsecondary counseling, workplace readiness, and instruction in self-advocacy (Whittenburg et al., 2024).

While these mandates provide a solid policy foundation, their implementation across the state has been uneven. In particular, the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, which includes a mix of rural and suburban districts, illustrates the variability in service delivery. Research indicates that rural areas such as those in the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania may face significant challenges in transition planning, including provider shortages, limited public transportation, and gaps in interagency coordination (Kucharczyk et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). These issues mirror broader national concerns about the gap between policy compliance and meaningful student outcomes. Gaumer Erickson et al. (2013) emphasize that despite efforts to promote results-oriented transition planning, many districts continue to focus on procedural compliance rather than authentic engagement or measurable postschool success.

To help bridge this gap, Pennsylvania has introduced the Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Framework, developed through a partnership among youth, families, and professionals. This framework supports the translation of legal mandates into student-centered practices by identifying key indicators of quality transition programming. As Kester et al. (2022) explain, policy alone is insufficient without opportunities for students to engage in "...authentic experiences and real conversations about their future" (p. 34).

### **Pennsylvania's Transition Framework and Resources**

Pennsylvania supports local implementation through an array of technical assistance systems and collaborative networks. The Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) provides professional development and compliance guidance focused on

IDEA Indicators 13 and 14 (PaTTAN, 2020). In addition, the Pennsylvania Community on Transition convenes state agencies, educators, families, and service providers to promote interagency collaboration and share best practices for postschool success (Kester et al., 2022).

At the regional level, Intermediate Units (IUs) and local councils, such as the Capital Area Regional Transition Council (CART), serve as essential hubs for training and capacity-building. These entities help ensure that schools across Central Pennsylvania, despite differences in size, resources, or demographics, can access consistent, high-quality transition supports. These multi-tiered systems reflect Pennsylvania's commitment to bridging the gap between statewide policy and local implementation by empowering districts to adopt youth-driven, context-specific approaches to transition planning.

### **Geographic and Demographic Variability in the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania**

The Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania encompasses a diverse mix of urban, suburban, and rural school districts, resulting in significant variability in access to transition resources and services. This region includes counties such as Cumberland, Dauphin, and Perry, each shaped by distinct economic, geographic, and demographic characteristics. According to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2023), nearly half of the school districts in this region are classified as rural, many of which serve small student populations dispersed across expansive geographic areas. These rural districts often face systemic barriers, including long travel distances, limited public transportation, reduced access to vocational and community-based learning opportunities, and staffing shortages among adult service providers (Eastman et al., 2021).

In more remote areas such as Perry and parts of Cumberland Counties, educators often highlight close-knit school-family relationships as a strength that fosters collaboration around transition planning. However, these same communities frequently experience reduced access to services from the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), as well as fewer opportunities for community-based work experiences due to geographic isolation and limited employer availability (Kucharczyk et al., 2021). In contrast, suburban and urban districts in the Capital Area Region, such as Harrisburg City School District and Cumberland Valley School District in Cumberland County, are better positioned to capitalize on proximity to employers, postsecondary institutions, and mental health and transition service providers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), Cumberland County had a population of approximately 270,738 residents, with 81.7% identifying as White (non-Hispanic), 5.3% as Asian, 4.1% as Black or African American, and 4.6% as Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, 39.6% of residents held a bachelor's degree or higher, indicating relatively strong educational attainment and access to human capital.

Even within suburban within Cumberland County, disparities persist between districts and among student subgroups. Cumberland Valley School District, for instance, serves a rapidly growing and economically diverse population and has implemented a proactive approach to transition that includes career exploration, student-led IEPs, and early initiation of transition planning aligned with the state's age 14 mandate (Cumberland Valley School District, 2024). Yet, rural districts within the same county and surrounding areas often lack consistent access to job coaches, Pre-ETS providers, or vocational training partners, which affects the quality and equity of transition services.

Despite these contextual differences, educators across the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania demonstrate a shared commitment to improving postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. Regional councils, such as the Capital Area Regional Transition Council (CART), and school-based transition teams have identified promising strategies including community-based instruction, increased student voice in IEP meetings, and the use of research-based models such as the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI). However, there is a need for more formal research examining how these practices are implemented and sustained across district types. As Kester et al. (2022) emphasize, “regional variation must be addressed through youth-informed models that respond to the distinct assets and barriers in each community” (p. 34). This underscores the need for equity-driven, localized research that captures the diverse realities of transition planning within the Capital Area Region.

### **Rationale for a Regional Study**

Pennsylvania’s decentralized education system contributes to considerable variation in how secondary transition services are delivered across the state. Although federal and state mandates establish clear requirements, the quality and consistency of implementation often hinge on local factors such as staffing capacity, interagency collaboration, and community infrastructure. As Snell-Rood et al. (2020) explain, “macro-level data may obscure important variation in how transition practices are enacted at the school and district level” (p. 1164), highlighting the limitations of relying solely on statewide reporting. This underscores the value of regional studies that examine how transition policies are interpreted and applied within specific local contexts.

The Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania is an ideal setting for such a study, given its mix of rural, suburban, and urban districts (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2023). The

diversity within the region presents both unique challenges and potential models of best practice. Transition coordinators and consultants, who often serve as the bridge between policy and practice, are particularly well-positioned to offer insight into how services are developed, adapted, and delivered at the local level (Plotner et al., 2015). Yet, their experiences are rarely examined in depth. By gathering perspectives from professionals in this region, the study aims to produce findings that reflect on-the-ground realities and offer guidance for future policy, training, and technical assistance efforts.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Despite progress in identifying effective transition practices, several key gaps persist:

- **Limited focus on transition coordinators and consultants:** The voices of these professionals, central to implementation, remain underrepresented in the literature (Plotner et al., 2015).
- **Lack of regionally focused implementation studies:** Much of the research aggregates data at the state or national level, failing to account for local variation. Whittenburg et al. (2024) emphasize the need for studies that examine how geographic, economic, and organizational differences affect service delivery.
- **Inconsistent fidelity and outcomes:** Studies have documented wide variation in the quality of transition plans and the availability of supports (Brown et al., 2023; Cavendish & Connor, 2017). These inconsistencies often reflect disparities in resources, training, and interagency coordination.
- **Underexplored rural challenges and assets:** Rural districts face unique logistical barriers but also offer strengths such as tight-knit school-community relationships (Eastman et al., 2021; Kucharczyk et al., 2021).

- **Equity gaps in transition outcomes:** Students from marginalized backgrounds, particularly those who are racially, linguistically, or economically disadvantaged, continue to experience unequal access to high-quality transition planning (Hughes et al., 2023; Mazzotti et al., 2020).

These gaps highlight the need for research that captures how transition practices are experienced and enacted at the regional level, especially through the lens of those implementing them.

### **Summary and Connection to the Current Study**

This chapter reviewed the legal foundations, theoretical models, evidence-based practices, and implementation challenges that shape secondary transition planning for students with disabilities. Several research-based frameworks, most notably Kohler's Taxonomy, the SDLMI, and the Transition Discoveries model, offer structured, student-centered approaches for improving outcomes. However, research continues to document uneven implementation, especially in rural and under-resourced areas, due to persistent challenges such as staffing shortages, fragmented partnerships, and gaps in training and role clarity.

These issues are especially relevant in the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, where geographic and demographic diversity results in wide variability in access to transition resources and services. Despite strong policy mandates and state-level supports, districts within the region face ongoing structural barriers and equity concerns that influence service delivery and student outcomes. At the same time, promising practices, such as student-led IEPs, interagency councils, and community-based instruction, are emerging across the region, though often without formal evaluation or replication.

This study responds to the identified gaps by examining how transition coordinators and consultants in the Capital Area Region interpret and implement transition planning requirements. These professionals operate within complex systems that are shaped by district culture, community partnerships, and resource constraints. Their insights can illuminate not only which strategies are working, but also where inconsistencies or systemic barriers persist.

Specifically, this study seeks to:

- Document current transition planning practices across the Capital Area Region;
- Identify strategies that practitioners perceive as most effective;
- Uncover gaps in service delivery and implementation; and
- Provide recommendations for regional supports and system-level improvements.

By focusing on this underrepresented professional group in a geographically diverse region, the study contributes to a more practical, nuanced understanding of transition service delivery. It aims to inform both scholarly discourse and local efforts to improve outcomes for students with disabilities as they move from school to adult life.

Through this lens, the present study builds upon the existing body of work while offering new insights grounded in practitioner experience within a specific regional context. Together, these methods are designed to capture practitioner perspectives and examine how transition frameworks and best practices are enacted in real-world settings across the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania.

## **Chapter 3: Methods**

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology used to explore how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. The study was guided by constructivist grounded theory, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and expanded by Charmaz (2006, 2014). This methodology provided a structured yet flexible approach for developing theory grounded in participants' lived experiences. It was particularly well suited for studying complex, context-specific practices shaped by variations in staffing, resources, and interagency collaboration across the region.

The study also incorporated Tracy's (2013) iterative model of qualitative research, which emphasizes reflexivity and the cyclical nature of data collection, analysis, and theory development. Rather than following a linear process, this model supported movement between stages of the research process, including coding, memo writing, and refining categories, based on emerging insights. Together, these methods provided a rigorous and adaptable framework for examining how transition planning was implemented across diverse educational settings.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Primary Research Question**

This study was guided by the following primary research question: *How do transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania?*

#### **Research Sub-Questions**

To support theory development, the following related sub-questions were also explored:

1. What do transition professionals identify as best practices that support successful post-school outcomes?
2. What barriers and challenges do transition professionals encounter when implementing transition services?
3. In what ways do transition professionals believe the programs and systems in which they work can be made better?

These questions served as sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2014; Tracy, 2013), offering an initial focus while allowing room for new ideas and categories to emerge inductively from the data.

### **Methodological Framework: Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was originally introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a systematic method for developing theory directly from empirical data. Their original approach focused on building theory from the ground up by continuously comparing new information with existing findings, selecting participants based on what emerged in the analysis, and allowing key ideas to develop naturally from the data. The goal was to create explanations that reflected participants' real-life experiences, rather than testing preexisting theories.

Charmaz (2006, 2014) later extended grounded theory through a constructivist lens, shifting the focus from discovering objective truths to understanding how meaning is socially constructed. Constructivist grounded theory retains the core components of the original model, such as constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and memo writing, but emphasizes that both the data and the analysis are shaped by the researcher's interactions with participants, as well as their positionality and disciplinary lens. According to Charmaz (2014), constructivist grounded theory provides a rigorous yet flexible framework for developing theory grounded in

participants' lived experiences, while also recognizing the interpretive role of the researcher. Data and analysis are understood through ongoing reflection and engagement, with meaning emerging through the researcher's sustained interaction with the data.

This study also drew on Tracy's (2013) iterative model of qualitative research, which supports recursive movement between data collection, coding, memo writing, and theory-building. Tracy suggests that grounded theory is most effective when researchers move back and forth between these stages in a process that is "circular, recursive, and reflexive" (p. 183). This approach enhanced the depth and integrity of the analysis by allowing findings to emerge gradually and responsively rather than through a fixed, linear process.

Constructivist grounded theory was especially well-suited for this study because it supported the development of a practice-based, context-sensitive understanding of transition planning. Rather than seeking universal or fixed truths, the aim was to generate theory that is rooted in the lived experiences of professionals and reflective of the diverse implementation practices across the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania.

### **Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**

As the researcher, I bring twelve years of experience in special education, including ten years as the Transition Coordinator for Big Spring School District in Central Pennsylvania. In this role, I coordinate and monitor transition services as part of students' IEPs, collaborate with families and agencies, and provide instruction in workplace readiness and independent living. I also help manage work-based learning experiences, such as internships and job shadowing, and ensure compliance with legal requirements. Additionally, I serve on the board of the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice, where I work with other transition professionals to share resources and promote best practices across the region. I support students

with a wide range of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, emotional and behavioral needs, and autism spectrum disorder.

My personal background also informs this work. As the sibling of a young woman with autism and an intellectual disability, I have seen firsthand how limited or uncoordinated services can affect a person's future. This experience led to my long-standing interest in improving systems that support students with disabilities during the transition to adulthood.

Because of my close connection to the field, I recognize the importance of reflexivity in this study. My perspectives may influence how I interpret the data, especially if participants' views align, or conflict, with my own professional experiences. To ensure integrity, I used memo writing, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling throughout the research process. These strategies will help maintain awareness of potential assumptions and ensure that the findings remained grounded in participants' voices..

### **Theoretical Sensitivity**

Theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher's ability to recognize and interpret significant data patterns and relationships, drawing from both professional experience and conceptual understanding (Charmaz, 2014). In constructivist grounded theory, this sensitivity is not limited to pre-existing theories but includes the researcher's insight into contextual meaning, practical knowledge, and responsiveness to emerging concepts during analysis.

As a transition coordinator with over a decade of experience in Central Pennsylvania, I bring a high degree of theoretical sensitivity and an emic perspective to this study. My daily work involves coordinating transition services, collaborating with multiple agencies, and navigating the systemic and interpersonal factors that influence implementation. These insider experiences have helped me develop an informed awareness of the challenges, nuances, and

patterns that shape transition planning in real-world educational settings. Additionally, my involvement in regional initiatives, such as serving on the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice board, has further deepened my understanding of local trends, professional discourse, and system-level barriers.

### **Participants and Sampling**

Participants in this study included members of the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice who served as transition coordinators or transition consultants within the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. These professionals were directly involved in the design, coordination, and implementation of transition services for students with disabilities, making them uniquely positioned to provide insight into local practices, challenges, and strategies. Special education administrators and other school personnel were not included in this study. Participants were required to have at least one year of experience in a role focused specifically on secondary transition under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Eligible individuals worked in local education agencies, intermediate units, or affiliated transition service networks across the region.

The study began with purposive sampling, drawing from existing CART membership lists to identify individuals with substantial experience and involvement in transition planning. As interviews were conducted and initial themes began to emerge, theoretical sampling was used to seek participants who could expand upon or challenge developing categories. Sampling continued with the goal of reaching theoretical saturation, defined as the point at which no new insights emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2014). However, because participation was limited to members of the CART Community of Practice, the final sample reflected the number of eligible

and willing participants who consented to be interviewed. A final sample of 16 participants was included, providing sufficient depth and variation of data to support grounded theory analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom. Interviews included open-ended questions to invite participants to reflect on their roles, practices, challenges, and insights related to transition planning. The interview guide (see Appendix A) provided consistency across interviews but remained flexible to follow the direction of each conversation. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. To enhance credibility and ensure accurate representation of participants' perspectives, a member checking process was incorporated. After transcription, participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript and invited to review it for accuracy, clarification, or elaboration. This step aligns with Tracy's (2013) criteria for ethical qualitative research by supporting transparency, relational accountability, and the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant.

Participants also completed a short demographic form to describe their background (e.g., years of experience, district size, student population). Demographic information was used to describe the sample and explore variation in perspectives based on years of experience, setting, or district characteristics. All transcripts and related data were securely stored on a password-protected device.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis followed the constructivist grounded theory approach described by Charmaz (2006, 2014), with data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously. This concurrent

process allowed the researcher to identify emerging themes early and refine subsequent sampling and questioning based on those insights.

The analysis involved five key components:

1. Initial coding – Line-by-line coding was conducted to identify actions, ideas, and processes directly from participants' language.
2. Focused coding – The most significant or frequently recurring codes were synthesized to form broader conceptual categories.
3. Theoretical coding – Relationships among categories were explored to construct a cohesive and explanatory framework.
4. Constant comparison – Data were continuously compared across participants and categories to identify patterns and refine understanding.
5. Memo writing – Analytic reflections, theoretical insights, and methodological decisions were documented throughout the process to support transparency and category development.

To support this process, data were analyzed using a combination of manual (hand) coding and AI-assisted analysis using the Gemini platform. Initial manual coding was conducted by the researcher on a sample of interview transcripts to establish early codes and develop sensitivity to the data. These hand-coded results were then compared to coding outputs generated by Gemini to assess alignment, identify potential blind spots, and support interrater reliability. This comparison strengthened the trustworthiness of the analysis by ensuring that emerging categories were consistent across methods and grounded in participant narratives.

The researcher retained full responsibility for all analytic decisions, and AI-generated themes were used only as a secondary layer of analysis to support, rather than substitute for, the interpretive judgment required by grounded theory. Memo writing accompanied all phases of analysis, documenting evolving thoughts and helping ensure that the developing theory remained closely tied to the data. While traditional grounded theory discourages early engagement with literature to avoid preconceptions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this study incorporated a prior literature review to establish context and justify the research focus. In alignment with Charmaz's (2006, 2014) constructivist approach and Tracy's (2013) iterative model, relevant literature was revisited during analysis to support the interpretation of emerging themes and situate findings within the broader field.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

To ensure methodological integrity, this study incorporated multiple strategies consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) and the qualitative research quality criteria outlined by Tracy (2013). These strategies were designed to support transparency, credibility, and reflexive rigor throughout data collection and analysis.

- **Credibility:** A combination of hand coding and AI-assisted coding (via Gemini) was used to compare and refine emerging categories. This method enhanced credibility by identifying areas of overlap and divergence between human and machine-coded themes, offering an additional check on consistency. In addition, member checking was employed by sharing interview transcripts and, when applicable, preliminary findings with participants to confirm that their perspectives were accurately represented and to invite clarification or elaboration. This process aligns with Tracy's (2013) emphasis on ethical representation and strengthen the trustworthiness of the study's interpretations.

- **Sincerity:** Reflexivity was built into the study through continuous memo writing and journaling. These practices allowed the researcher to examine how personal background, assumptions, and experiences may have influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data. In addition, member checking was used not only to support credibility but also as a practice of sincere engagement with participants, offering them the opportunity to review transcripts and clarify or expand upon their contributions. This approach reflects Tracy's (2013) call for honesty, transparency, and relational ethics in qualitative research, ensuring that findings were co-constructed with participants rather than solely interpreted by the researcher.
- **Resonance:** Participant voices were represented using thick description and rich, illustrative quotes that captured the complexity of their experiences. Findings were presented in a way that is relatable to both scholarly and practitioner audiences.
- **Transparency:** An audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions, analytic shifts, and rationale for interpreting data. The use of both manual and AI-assisted methods was clearly reported, including how AI outputs were evaluated and integrated.
- **Theoretical saturation:** While theoretical saturation remained the goal, the final sample reflected the number of eligible and willing participants. Ongoing comparison of themes across interviews helped determine when categories were sufficiently developed.

These strategies were intended to produce findings that were both trustworthy and grounded in the lived experiences of transition professionals, while also acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role in constructing meaning. Together, these approaches aligned with Tracy's (2013) "big tent" criteria for high-quality qualitative research and Charmaz's (2014) standards for rigor in grounded theory methodology.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for human subjects research and received approval from the Slippery Rock University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. All participants were provided with a clear, written explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and voluntary nature through an informed consent form. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequence.

Because the research involved professionals affiliated with the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice, site permission was obtained from the CART Leadership Representative prior to initiating participant recruitment. CART functions as a professional learning network rather than a formal school district or educational agency; therefore, separate site-level IRB approval was not required. Recruitment occurred through CART's listserv and professional communication channels with leadership approval. No direct access to school sites, student data, or confidential institutional records was required as part of this study.

Because the researcher is a practicing transition coordinator in the same region under study, particular care was taken to address potential issues related to dual roles, power dynamics, and confidentiality. While some participants may have known the researcher professionally through regional networks, participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and steps were taken to ensure anonymity and reduce potential coercion.

Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying details such as district names, job titles, or geographic references were removed or masked during transcription and reporting. All interview recordings, transcripts, and demographic data were stored on a

password-protected, encrypted device accessible only to the researcher. Data will be retained only for the duration necessary to complete the research and final dissertation.

Additionally, the use of AI-assisted coding tools through the Gemini platform introduced unique ethical considerations related to data privacy and analytic transparency. To mitigate risk, AI-assisted coding was conducted only on de-identified transcripts. No personal or district-specific information was uploaded to the platform. The researcher maintained full responsibility for interpreting and integrating the results and documented how AI-generated outputs were compared to manual coding to ensure analytic integrity.

These protocols were designed to protect participant confidentiality, promote informed consent, and uphold the trustworthiness and ethical rigor of the research process, particularly in light of the researcher's dual role and the use of emerging digital tools in qualitative analysis.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

This study is delimited to transition coordinators and consultants within the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania who are members of the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice. It does not include the perspectives of students, families, or special education administrators. This boundary was intentionally set to allow for a focused exploration of how professionals directly responsible for implementing transition planning practices experience and interpret those responsibilities in their local contexts.

A primary limitation of this study is its geographic scope. By concentrating solely on the Capital Area Region of Central Pennsylvania, the findings may not capture the full range of experiences present in other regions with different demographic, economic, or organizational characteristics. While the region includes a mix of rural, suburban, and small urban districts, offering some variation in implementation settings, it does not represent all school environments

across the state or country. Additionally, the relatively small size of the CART Community of Practice may limit the total number of available and willing participants, which could affect the diversity of perspectives included in the final sample.

The goal of constructivist grounded theory is not universal generalization, but theory development that is situated in the realities of participants (Charmaz, 2014) and grounded in context-specific meaning-making rather than abstract claims of truth (Tracy, 2013). As such, the insights generated from this study are intended to be contextually rich and locally relevant, with the potential to inform both practice and future inquiry in similar settings, rather than to offer sweeping generalizations.

### **Presentation of Results**

Findings from this study will be shared through the final dissertation manuscript and may also be presented at regional CART meetings, transition-focused professional development sessions, and state-level conferences. Participants will receive a summary of key themes and recommendations. All presentations and reports will use pseudonyms and de-identified data to protect confidentiality.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter 3 detailed the methods used to explore how transition professionals experience transition planning for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. By using constructivist grounded theory alongside an iterative qualitative process, this study focused on the lived experiences of professionals while acknowledging the researcher's own perspective and positionality. Semi-structured interviews, demographic data, memo writing, and AI-assisted coding provided a flexible yet systematic approach for capturing how participants navigate practices, challenges, and opportunities in their work. Ethical safeguards, reflexivity, and

strategies for rigor were incorporated to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the experiences and insights of the professionals themselves. Overall, the methodology outlined in this chapter established a foundation for understanding the nuances of transition planning as it is implemented in real-world settings and for generating theory grounded in the voices of those directly involved.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 4 presents the findings of this qualitative study examining how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. This chapter is grounded in data collected through semi-structured interviews with sixteen transition professionals (P01–P16) representing a range of educational settings, including school districts, intermediate units, cyber or nontraditional programs, and regional support roles. The chapter begins with a brief restatement of the study’s research questions to orient the reader to the focus of the analysis. It then describes the data analysis process as it occurred in practice, distinguishing the analytic procedures implemented in this study from the methodological plan outlined in Chapter 3 where relevant. This section details how interview transcripts were coded, compared, and synthesized to identify patterns across participants, with attention to transparency and analytic rigor. Following the description of the analytic process, the chapter presents the study’s findings through a thematic narrative grounded in participant perspectives. Five themes emerged through focused coding, pattern mapping, and cross-participant comparison. These themes reflect shared conditions, actions, and constraints described by transition professionals as they navigate the implementation of transition planning within diverse organizational and regional contexts. Consistent with qualitative research conventions, the findings are presented descriptively and analytically, using participant quotations to illustrate key patterns and variations across the data set. Connections to existing literature, policy implications, and theoretical interpretation are intentionally reserved for Chapter 5.

### **Restatement of Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following primary research question:

How do transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania?

To support theory development and deepen understanding of implementation contexts, the following sub-questions were also explored:

1. What do transition professionals identify as best practices that support successful postschool outcomes?
2. What barriers and challenges do transition professionals encounter when implementing transition services?
3. In what ways do transition professionals believe the programs and systems in which they work can be improved?

### **Data Analysis Process**

Data analysis was conducted using a constructivist grounded theory approach, consistent with the methodological framework outlined in Chapter 3. Analysis occurred iteratively and concurrently with data collection, allowing emerging insights to inform ongoing comparison, refinement of codes, and consolidation of themes. While Chapter 3 described the planned analytic procedures, this section details how the analysis unfolded in practice and notes minor adaptations that occurred as part of an iterative qualitative process.

### **Overview of Analytic Approach**

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy prior to analysis. Analysis followed Charmaz's (2006, 2014) constructivist grounded theory procedures, emphasizing constant comparison, memo writing, and the co-construction of meaning between

researcher and participants. In alignment with Tracy's (2013) iterative model of qualitative research, data collection, coding, and analytic reflection occurred in a recursive manner rather than as discrete, linear stages. This approach supported responsiveness to emerging patterns and allowed categories to be refined as additional interviews were conducted.

### **Coding Procedures**

Analysis began with initial coding, using line-by-line coding of transcripts to identify actions, processes, and meanings expressed in participants' own words. Codes were kept close to the data and framed using action-oriented language to capture what participants were doing, navigating, or managing within their transition roles. Following initial coding, focused coding was used to synthesize the most significant and frequently occurring codes across transcripts. During this phase, similar codes were compared, collapsed, or refined to develop broader conceptual categories. Constant comparison was applied both within and across participant transcripts to identify patterns, similarities, and points of variation. Coding decisions were documented through analytic memos, which captured reflections, questions, and emerging connections among categories.

While theoretical coding was identified in Chapter 3 as a distinct analytic phase, in practice, theoretical integration occurred through focused coding, memo writing, and pattern mapping rather than through a separate formal coding cycle. Relationships among categories were explored by examining how codes clustered across participants, their distribution across the data set, and the conditions under which particular experiences were described. This process supported the development of higher-level themes that moved beyond descriptive categorization toward explanatory patterns grounded in the data.

### **Use of AI-Assisted Analysis**

As planned, AI-assisted analysis using the Gemini platform was incorporated as a secondary layer of analysis to support, but not replace, manual coding. Initial coding and category development were conducted by the researcher through hand coding. De-identified transcripts were then analyzed using Gemini, and AI-generated codes and thematic groupings were compared to manually derived codes. This comparison was used to assess alignment, identify potential blind spots, and strengthen analytic rigor. All analytic decisions remained the responsibility of the researcher. AI-generated outputs were treated as analytic prompts rather than authoritative findings and were integrated only when they were supported by participant data and consistent with memo-based analysis. This comparative process contributed to transparency and trustworthiness while maintaining fidelity to constructivist grounded theory principles.

### **Adaptations From the Planned Analysis**

Several minor adaptations occurred between the analytic plan described in Chapter 3 and the analysis as implemented. First, the final sample included sixteen participants, exceeding the anticipated range of twelve to fifteen due to participant availability and interest. Second, while theoretical coding was initially conceptualized as a distinct phase, theoretical integration emerged organically through focused coding, cross-participant comparison, and iterative memo writing rather than through a separate coding stage. These adaptations reflect the flexible and responsive nature of constructivist grounded theory and are consistent with Tracy's (2013) emphasis on recursive qualitative analysis.

### **Theme Development**

Through focused coding, constant comparison, and pattern mapping across participants, five themes emerged that captured shared conditions, actions, and constraints shaping the implementation of transition planning practices. Theme development was guided by the prevalence of focused codes across participants, the conceptual coherence of clustered categories, and their explanatory power across diverse professional roles and educational settings. Rather than representing isolated experiences, the themes reflect cross-participant patterns grounded in repeated accounts of how transition professionals navigated systemic expectations, organizational limitations, and regional contexts.

The five themes identified were: (1) holding the transition system together without authority, (2) IEP-centered planning in capacity-constrained systems, (3) student-centered intentions vs. structural reality, (4) navigating families through fragmented adult systems, and (5) geography, setting, and unequal access to transition supports. The themes presented in the following sections represent analytic syntheses derived from participant narratives and are illustrated using direct quotations to preserve participant voice and variability.

The next section presents the findings through a thematic narrative, beginning with Theme 1.

#### **Theme 1: Holding the Transition System Together Without Authority**

The first theme, holding the transition system together without authority, captures how transition professionals functioned as informal system connectors within fragmented educational and adult service structures. Across settings, participants described roles that extended well beyond formal job descriptions, requiring them to coordinate people, services, and information across systems in which they held limited positional authority. Rather than relying on formal power, participants described sustaining transition planning through relationship-building,

persistence, and a personal sense of responsibility for ensuring that students did not “fall through the cracks.”

This theme was evident across nearly all participants, regardless of role, setting, or years of experience, and reflected a shared experience of absorbing systemic gaps in order to maintain continuity for students and families. Participants consistently described transition work as dependent on constant monitoring, follow-through, and informal problem-solving to prevent services, plans, or opportunities from unraveling. Rather than occurring at isolated points in time, this effort was described as ongoing and necessary to sustain momentum throughout the transition process.

### *Transition Professionals as System Connectors*

Participants frequently described serving as the primary point of coordination between schools, families, and outside agencies, often without the authority to direct those systems or enforce follow-through. Many characterized their work as holding together multiple moving parts across school-based teams, community agencies, and adult service systems. One participant described the breadth of this coordination work, noting:

I work with all students of special ed of transition age. I attend IEP meetings, I coordinate OVR, I take students out on field trips, I observe them at work sites, I help families explore after high school programming, and I work closely with staff to make sure transition sections are done well (P12).

Several participants emphasized that they assumed these responsibilities not because they were formally assigned, but because without their involvement, key transition activities would not occur. As one transition coordinator explained, their role had expanded significantly over time due to staffing and budget constraints:

I was hired as strictly a transition coordinator, and then this year I'm also teaching two transition courses. I try to go to as many IEP meetings as I possibly can, but with teaching it becomes difficult. I'm still trying to support the whole district and all transition-age students the way it should be done (P11).

Other participants described acting as the central point of contact for families navigating complex systems, even when that coordination extended beyond their official role. In districts with limited transition infrastructure, participants noted that transition work often depended on a single individual maintaining continuity across systems. One participant described the fragility of this arrangement, stating, "It seems like we get things up and running, and as soon as we let our finger off the pulse, things fall off" (P16). Another participant articulated this dependence even more explicitly, reflecting on the absence of formalized procedures to guide transition planning: "If it wasn't for me, I don't know what would be happening. There is no system. There's nothing written down that says this happens at this age or this point. If I leave, I don't know what would happen" (P10).

These accounts highlighted how transition professionals positioned themselves as bridges between siloed systems, simultaneously navigating special education requirements, adult service eligibility processes, and family expectations. This coordination was described as essential but largely invisible, occurring behind the scenes and often unrecognized within formal organizational structures. As a result, the responsibility for maintaining continuity across systems frequently rested on individual professionals rather than on clearly defined roles or procedures.

### ***Absorbing Systemic Gaps and Role Expansion***

A related pattern within this theme involved participants describing the need to absorb gaps created by staffing shortages, limited agency capacity, or unclear role boundaries.

Participants across settings reported stepping into responsibilities traditionally associated with case management, job coaching, or program coordination, even when these tasks were not formally assigned to their positions. One participant described managing layers of responsibility simultaneously, explaining:

I also teach, I also have my caseload, I manage field trips, I set up meetings, I coordinate with parents who aren't even on my caseload. It's not hard, but it's another layer of everything you have to manage all the time (P12).

Others described role expansion as a direct response to resource limitations. Several participants noted that when staffing or funding fell short, transition professionals often filled gaps personally to avoid disrupting student opportunities. One participant described the strain this created, particularly when coverage issues arose: "When I'm out on a field trip, I need coverage for my class, coverage for duties, and everything else still has to get done. There's just so many layers to it" (P12).

Participants also described absorbing gaps related to program design and system capacity. One regional consultant reflected on the consequences of limited staffing ratios and inconsistent implementation, stating: "Implementation has been a massive struggle. We serve a wide range of students, and the intensity is high. The student-to-staff ratio needs to be looked at differently, because otherwise things just don't hold together" (P16).

Overall, these experiences were described as ongoing rather than sporadic, suggesting that role expansion had become normalized within transition work. Participants consistently indicated that stepping back from these expanded responsibilities would often mean leaving students without support during critical transition periods.

*Relational and Emotional Labor Without Formal Authority*

Participants also emphasized the relational and emotional dimensions of holding transition systems together. Many described investing significant time in building trust with families, maintaining relationships with agency partners, and navigating resistance from colleagues, all without formal authority to compel action. This work was frequently described as emotionally taxing, particularly when participants felt responsible for outcomes they lacked the power to control. One participant reflected on this strain, stating: “It is very difficult. There is no follow-through. I’m left to do what I want to do, even when it is good for the kids” (P11). Further, several participants described relying on persuasion and relationships rather than policy enforcement to move transition planning forward. One coordinator explained that while transition planning was a personal passion, success often depended on convincing others to invest time and effort: “I don’t have an issue writing transition plans. That’s my passion. The hardest part is getting parents and teachers on board and helping them see why this matters” (P14).

Meanwhile, others highlighted the emotional toll of managing competing priorities while maintaining commitment to students and families. One participant described the pressure of carrying responsibility across unstable systems, noting: “Sometimes staff are just trying to get through the day and keep students safe, and that work is important. But exit dates are coming whether we’re ready or not, and someone has to keep moving transition forward” (P16). Despite these challenges, participants expressed a strong commitment to sustaining transition services through relational means. Several emphasized that trust, persistence, and informal collaboration were what ultimately allowed systems to function, even imperfectly, in the absence of formal authority.

### ***Summary of Theme 1***

Together, these findings illustrate how transition professionals held transition systems together through informal coordination, role expansion, and relational labor rather than through positional authority. Participants' experiences reflected a shared understanding that effective transition planning depended not only on compliance structures, but on individuals willing to absorb systemic gaps, monitor fragile processes, and sustain relationships across fragmented systems. This theme establishes a foundation for understanding how transition planning is enacted in practice and sets the stage for subsequent themes related to capacity constraints, student-centered intentions, and systemic limitations.

### **Theme 2: IEP-Centered Planning in Capacity-Constrained Systems**

The second theme, IEP-centered planning in capacity-constrained systems, captures how transition professionals consistently described the Individualized Education Program (IEP) as the central organizing structure for transition planning, while simultaneously emphasizing the limits of what could realistically be implemented within existing time, staffing, and resource constraints. Across settings, participants framed the IEP as both an essential anchor and a constraining mechanism, serving as the primary vehicle for documenting transition goals, services, and compliance even when implementation capacity was limited.

Participants described investing significant effort in ensuring that transition sections of the IEP were thorough, accurate, and legally defensible, while also acknowledging that the quality of implementation often depended on factors outside the IEP itself. As one participant explained, "It's not hard to write the plans and get the services written in. Sometimes it's hard to get the parents and teachers on board, and even harder to make it all actually happen" (P14).

### *The IEP as the Central Anchor for Transition Planning*

Across roles and settings, participants consistently described the IEP as the central reference point for transition planning. Transition goals, agency involvement, work experiences, and postschool pathways were all described as flowing through the IEP process. Many participants emphasized their responsibility for supporting case managers in strengthening transition sections, monitoring compliance, and aligning goals with student interests and services.

Several participants described this work as foundational to their role. One transition coordinator explained, “I train teachers on writing legally compliant, defensible transition sections of IEPs. I spot check plans, support student interviews, and make sure what’s written reflects what students actually want to do” (P14). Another noted that transition planning often became synonymous with IEP quality within their district, stating that strong transition planning was frequently judged by “what the IEP looks like on paper” rather than by what students experienced day to day (P11).

At the same time, participants emphasized that while transition planning was formally housed within the IEP, much of the work occurred outside of scheduled meetings. Informal conversations with students, follow-up with families, coordination with agencies, and problem-solving around logistics were described as critical components of transition planning that were not always visible in documentation. As one participant explained, “We do what’s required by law, but there isn’t a system that says this happens at this age and this happens next. A lot of that lives outside the IEP, and someone has to keep track of it” (P10).

### ***Capacity Constraints and the Limits of Implementation***

Despite the centrality of the IEP, participants consistently described capacity constraints as shaping what transition planning looked like in practice. Time limitations, staffing shortages, and competing responsibilities were identified as persistent barriers to meaningful implementation. Several participants described holding multiple roles simultaneously, limiting their ability to attend IEP meetings, follow through on goals, or consistently support students across settings.

One participant described the cumulative effect of these constraints, stating, "I also teach, I have my own caseload, I manage field trips, I set up meetings, and I coordinate with parents who aren't even on my caseload. It's not hard, but it's another layer of everything you have to manage all the time (P12)."

Others echoed this experience, noting that teaching responsibilities reduced their ability to participate in IEP meetings despite recognizing their importance for transition planning (P11).

Participants also described how staffing shortages shifted the focus from implementation to compliance. One transition coordinator explained that when capacity was limited, "transition becomes checking boxes instead of really building something meaningful, even when you know what best practice should look like" (P11). In these contexts, the IEP remained the formal mechanism for transition planning, but implementation was driven by what was feasible rather than what was ideal.

### ***IEP Quality Versus System Capacity***

A recurring pattern across interviews involved participants distinguishing between the quality of IEPs and the capacity of systems to support what those plans outlined. Several participants emphasized that well-written transition goals did not automatically translate into

meaningful experiences or outcomes, particularly when districts lacked transportation, job coaches, or flexible scheduling.

One participant described this disconnect clearly, noting, “We can write really strong transition goals, but if we don’t have transportation or staff to get students out, those goals stay on paper” (P12). Others described how rigid academic schedules limited access to work-based learning, even when transition goals were clearly articulated in the IEP. As one participant explained, “Some students are in classes all day, and I can’t pull them to do job shadows or career exploration. The plan is there, but the structure doesn’t support it” (P14).

Participants also described variability in how transition planning was prioritized across leadership teams. While some reported administrative support for transition-focused IEPs, others described competing priorities that limited flexibility and resource allocation. One participant reflected on this tension, stating, “We’re told transition is important, but when it comes to budget or staffing decisions, it’s not always reflected there” (P11). In these contexts, the IEP functioned as a necessary compliance document but was not consistently supported by systems designed to operationalize its contents.

### ***Summary of Theme 2***

Together, these findings illustrate how transition planning remained firmly anchored in the IEP, even as professionals navigated significant capacity constraints that shaped what could be implemented in practice. Participants described investing substantial effort in developing high-quality, compliant transition plans, while also recognizing the limits imposed by time, staffing, and organizational structures. This theme highlights a persistent tension between planning and implementation, demonstrating that while the IEP served as the central framework

for transition planning, its effectiveness depended heavily on the systems and resources available to bring those plans to life.

### **Theme 3: Student-Centered Intentions vs. Structural Reality**

The third theme, student-centered intentions vs. structural reality, captures the tension transition professionals described between a strong commitment to student-centered, individualized transition planning and the structural realities that constrained what could be implemented in practice. Across participants, there was consistent emphasis on prioritizing student voice, preferences, and postschool goals. At the same time, participants described systemic barriers, including scheduling, staffing, transportation, and program sustainability, that frequently limited their ability to enact individualized plans as intended.

Participants framed student-centered planning as a core professional value rather than an optional component of transition services. Many described intentional efforts to involve students in goal-setting, support self-advocacy, and align transition activities with individual interests. One participant emphasized that meaningful transition planning required centering the student's perspective, stating, "If the student isn't part of the conversation, then it's not really transition planning, it's just planning for them" (P04). These efforts were described as essential to developing plans that reflected students' aspirations rather than default or convenience-based pathways.

#### ***Commitment to Student Voice and Individualized Planning***

Across roles and settings, participants consistently described a commitment to honoring student voice and supporting individualized transition pathways. This commitment was reflected in practices such as conducting student interviews, revisiting goals over time, and adjusting plans as students' interests evolved. Several participants emphasized that student-centered planning

required ongoing engagement rather than a single IEP meeting. One transition professional explained, “It’s not a one-time conversation. Students change, and their goals change, so you have to keep coming back to what makes sense for them” (P13).

Participants also noted that individualized planning often required flexibility and creativity, particularly for students with complex needs or nontraditional goals. One participant described the importance of slowing down the planning process to ensure student understanding and engagement, explaining that “taking the time to really hear what the student wants can make all the difference, even when it doesn’t fit neatly into what we already offer” (P09).

### ***Structural Constraints Shaping Implementation***

Despite strong intentions, participants consistently described structural constraints that shaped the extent to which student-centered plans could be implemented. Scheduling limitations were frequently cited as a primary barrier, particularly rigid academic schedules that limited access to work-based learning, community-based instruction, or career exploration aligned with student goals. As one participant noted, “We can talk about what the student wants to do, but if they’re in required classes all day, there’s nowhere for that to actually happen” (P06).

Staffing constraints further limited individualization. Participants described shortages of job coaches, paraprofessionals, and transition staff, particularly for students requiring higher levels of support. In these contexts, participants indicated that planning decisions were often influenced by available personnel rather than student preference. One participant reflected, “Sometimes the plan becomes what we can staff, not what the student really wants” (P11).

Transportation was also identified as a significant barrier, particularly in rural or geographically dispersed districts. Participants described situations in which students’ interests could not be pursued due to limited or nonexistent transportation to job sites, training programs,

or community activities. Several noted that transportation constraints often determined which transition options were realistically available, regardless of student interest or readiness. As one transition professional explained, “We have students who want to work in the community, but if there’s no way to get them there, that option disappears” (P02). Participants further described how transportation limitations disproportionately affected students who required adult supervision or specialized supports, as these needs restricted the use of public transportation even when it was technically available. In some cases, transition planning defaulted to school-based or on-campus activities not because they aligned with student goals, but because they were the only options that could be reliably accessed. This dynamic contributed to a narrowing of individualized pathways, with transportation functioning as a structural gatekeeper that shaped which transition experiences could be implemented in practice.

Program sustainability emerged as an additional constraint shaping student-centered planning. Participants noted that programs designed to provide individualized experiences were often vulnerable to staffing changes, funding shifts, or administrative turnover. Several described investing significant time in developing programs or partnerships that aligned with student interests, only to see those efforts disrupted or discontinued when personnel or resources changed. As one participant explained, “You can build something really good, but if the staffing or funding changes, it’s hard to keep it going the same way” (P15). Participants further described how uncertainty around sustainability influenced planning decisions. In some cases, transition professionals hesitated to commit students to highly individualized or resource-intensive options when long-term continuity could not be guaranteed. Instead, planning sometimes favored options perceived as more stable, even when they were less aligned with student preferences. This

pattern reflected how concerns about program longevity shaped the extent to which student-centered plans could be maintained over time.

### ***Balancing Values and Feasibility***

A recurring pattern across interviews involved participants grappling with the gap between student-centered values and what was feasible within existing systems. This tension was often described as professionally challenging, particularly when participants believed they understood best practice but lacked the structural support to implement it fully. One participant described this conflict directly, stating, “We talk a lot about student voice and choice, but there are times when the system just doesn’t allow for it in the way we want” (P08).

Participants described making practical decisions to balance student-centered intentions with what could realistically be implemented and sustained within existing program structures. In several cases, participants noted that individualized planning was shaped by the availability and design of established programs, even when those programs did not fully align with student interests or goals. One participant explained, “We try to be creative, but there’s only so much flexibility when programs are already set up a certain way” (P15).

### **Sustaining Student-Centered Intentions Within Constraints**

Despite these constraints, participants consistently described efforts to preserve student-centered planning whenever possible. Many described adapting plans incrementally, using short-term experiences, creative scheduling, or informal opportunities to align services with student goals. Others emphasized advocacy within their districts and with external partners as a way to expand options over time. Several participants described this work as requiring ongoing negotiation and persistence. One transition professional noted, “You’re constantly trying to balance what’s best for the student with what the system will actually support, and that balance

shifts all the time” (P10). These efforts were described as essential to preventing transition planning from becoming overly standardized or purely compliance-driven.

### ***Summary of Theme 3***

Together, these findings illustrate a persistent tension between transition professionals’ commitment to student-centered planning and the structural realities that constrained implementation. Participants described strong intentions to honor student voice, individualized pathways, and meaningful engagement, while simultaneously navigating scheduling, staffing, transportation, and program sustainability challenges. This theme highlights how student-centered planning, while widely valued, was often shaped by systemic feasibility rather than solely by student preference, reinforcing the complexity of implementing individualized transition services within constrained systems.

### **Theme 4: Navigating Families Through Fragmented Adult Systems**

The fourth theme, navigating families through fragmented adult systems, captures how transition professionals described supporting families as they attempted to navigate complex, disjointed adult service systems. Across participants, families were described as facing unclear eligibility requirements, inconsistent communication across agencies, and limited guidance regarding timelines and next steps. Transition professionals frequently positioned themselves as intermediaries, helping families interpret information, coordinate services, and manage expectations during the transition from school-based to adult systems.

Participants emphasized that family navigation work was not confined to formal meetings or documentation, but occurred through ongoing communication, troubleshooting, and follow-up. This work was often described as time-intensive and emotionally demanding, particularly when families encountered barriers beyond the control of school-based personnel. Participants

noted that without sustained support, families were at risk of becoming overwhelmed or disengaged during critical transition periods.

### ***Transition Professionals as Intermediaries for Families***

Across settings, participants consistently described serving as a primary point of contact for families navigating adult service systems. Many noted that families often looked to transition professionals for guidance regarding postschool options, eligibility processes, and agency roles, even when those systems operated independently of schools. One participant explained, “Families don’t know who to call or what comes next, so they call me, even if it’s something that’s technically outside of the school system” (P07).

Participants described translating agency language, clarifying requirements, and helping families understand timelines related to adult services such as vocational rehabilitation, benefits, and community supports. Several noted that families frequently assumed schools would continue coordinating services after graduation, requiring transition professionals to carefully explain system boundaries while still offering support. One participant reflected, “They think there’s going to be a handoff, like someone just takes over. But that’s not really how it works, and families are often surprised by that” (P03).

### ***Fragmentation and Lack of Coordination Across Adult Systems***

Participants consistently described adult service systems as fragmented and difficult for families to navigate independently. Agencies were described as operating in silos, with limited communication across providers and inconsistent follow-through. This fragmentation often required families to manage multiple applications, appointments, and eligibility determinations simultaneously. One transition professional described this process as overwhelming for families,

stating, “They’re being told to call this agency, fill out that paperwork, wait for a response, and then start over somewhere else if it doesn’t work out” (P12).

Several participants noted that timelines across agencies were misaligned with school transition planning, creating gaps in services after graduation. Families were often required to initiate contact with adult agencies well in advance, yet received limited guidance on when or how to do so. One participant explained, “If you don’t know the right timing, you miss windows. And families don’t know that unless someone tells them” (P05).

### ***Emotional Labor and Advocacy in Family Support***

In addition to logistical challenges, participants described the emotional labor involved in supporting families through uncertainty and frustration. Many described families experiencing anxiety, fear, or disappointment when adult services did not align with expectations established during the school years. Transition professionals often found themselves managing emotional responses while attempting to maintain realistic expectations. One participant shared, “Families are scared. They’re worried about what happens when school ends, and sometimes there just aren’t clear answers to give them” (P14).

Participants also described advocating on behalf of families when systems stalled or communication broke down. This advocacy included following up with agencies, attending meetings, and helping families reframe next steps when plans changed. While participants emphasized that advocacy was an important part of their role, they also noted that it contributed to workload strain, particularly when family needs extended beyond school-based responsibilities.

### *Uneven Family Access to Navigation Support*

Participants described variability in the level of navigation support families received, often influenced by district resources, staffing, and professional availability. In some contexts, families had access to dedicated transition personnel who could provide ongoing guidance. In others, support was limited to brief conversations during IEP meetings. One participant noted, “Some families get a lot of hand-holding, and others get almost none, depending on where they live and who’s available to help” (P01).

Participants also noted that families with prior system knowledge or external advocacy resources were often better positioned to navigate adult services, while those without such resources faced greater challenges. This variability contributed to uneven transition experiences across families, even within the same region.

### *Summary of Theme 4*

Together, these findings illustrate how transition professionals played a central role in supporting families through fragmented adult service systems characterized by limited coordination, unclear processes, and misaligned timelines. Participants described providing guidance, advocacy, and emotional support as families navigated complex postschool systems, often without formal structures to ensure continuity. This theme highlights the extent to which successful transition planning depended not only on student-focused efforts, but also on professionals’ capacity to support families through systemic uncertainty and fragmentation.

### **Theme 5: Geography, Setting, and Unequal Access to Transition Supports**

The fifth theme, geography, setting, and unequal access to transition supports, captures how participants described regional, county, and setting-based differences as shaping access to transition services, community opportunities, and adult supports. Across interviews, transition

professionals emphasized that where a student lived, attended school, or received services significantly influenced the availability and quality of transition experiences. These differences were described as structural rather than individual, reflecting broader patterns of geographic inequity across the Capital Area Region.

Participants consistently noted that transition planning did not occur within a uniform landscape. Instead, access to services was shaped by factors such as district size, rurality, county-level resources, transportation infrastructure, and proximity to employers or postsecondary institutions. As a result, students with similar needs and goals experienced markedly different transition opportunities depending on context.

### ***Regional and County-Level Variability***

Participants frequently described county-level differences in adult service availability and eligibility as a major influence on transition planning. Several noted that services such as vocational rehabilitation, waiver programs, and community supports were not consistently accessible across counties, creating uneven postschool pathways. One participant explained, “What’s available really depends on the county. You can cross a county line and everything changes” (P16).

Participants described having to tailor transition planning based on county-specific systems, timelines, and expectations. In some cases, students living near county borders were described as having access to a wider range of services, while others were limited by fewer local options. This variability required transition professionals to maintain detailed, location-specific knowledge and often complicated planning for families unfamiliar with these differences.

### ***Rurality, Transportation, and Community Access***

Rurality emerged as a significant factor shaping access to transition opportunities. Participants described how limited public transportation, long travel distances, and fewer local employers restricted access to work-based learning and community experiences. One participant noted, “In rural areas, there just aren’t as many places for students to go, and transportation becomes the deciding factor” (P02).

Participants also emphasized that rural settings often required greater coordination and creativity to facilitate community-based instruction. However, even with these efforts, opportunities remained limited compared to suburban or urban areas. Several participants described relying on school-based or simulated experiences when community access was not feasible, despite recognizing that these options did not fully replicate real-world environments.

### ***Setting-Based Differences in Transition Infrastructure***

Participants described notable differences in transition infrastructure across educational settings, including traditional school districts, intermediate units, and cyber or nontraditional programs. Access to dedicated transition staff, community partnerships, and work-based learning opportunities varied widely across these contexts. One participant explained, “Some settings have built-in partnerships and programs, and others are starting from scratch every time” (P01).

Participants noted that students in programs with established transition infrastructure often benefited from more consistent exposure to employment and community experiences. In contrast, students in settings with limited infrastructure relied heavily on individual staff members to identify and coordinate opportunities. These differences contributed to uneven implementation of transition planning across settings, even within the same geographic region.

### *Cumulative Effects of Contextual Inequity*

Across interviews, participants described how geographic and setting-based constraints interacted with the challenges identified in earlier themes, including capacity limitations, fragmented adult systems, and reliance on individual professionals. Participants emphasized that these contextual factors compounded one another, shaping not only what transition planning looked like, but what outcomes were realistically achievable for students.

One participant summarized this interaction by stating, “We’re all trying to do the same thing, but the reality is that where you work and where the student lives changes everything” (P10). This perspective reflected a shared understanding that unequal access was not the result of individual effort or commitment, but of structural conditions beyond the control of transition professionals.

### *Summary of Theme 5*

Together, these findings illustrate how geography, setting, and regional context played a significant role in shaping access to transition supports across the Capital Area Region. Participants described substantial variability in services, transportation, and community opportunities based on county systems, rurality, and educational setting. This theme highlights how transition planning occurred within uneven structural landscapes, contributing to differential access to postschool pathways for students with disabilities. As the final theme, it underscores the broader contextual conditions within which transition professionals implemented planning practices and navigated the challenges described throughout this chapter.

## **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 presented findings from interviews with sixteen transition professionals regarding their experiences implementing transition planning practices for students with

disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. Using constructivist grounded theory procedures, five themes were identified that reflected shared conditions, actions, and constraints shaping transition planning across settings. These themes highlighted the central role of transition professionals in sustaining fragmented systems, the anchoring function of the IEP amid capacity constraints, tensions between student-centered intentions and structural feasibility, the extensive support required to help families navigate adult systems, and regional and setting-based differences influencing access to transition opportunities.

The findings presented in this chapter describe what emerged from participants' accounts without interpretive comparison to existing literature. Chapter 5 builds upon these findings by situating them within the broader research base and discussing implications for practice, policy, and future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This study explored how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen transition professionals representing a range of educational contexts, including local school districts, intermediate units, cyber or nontraditional programs, and regional support roles. Participants provided detailed accounts of their experiences coordinating transition services, supporting students and families, and navigating the structural conditions that shape transition planning within their respective settings.

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the study through five themes that emerged from iterative coding, constant comparison, and cross-participant analysis. These themes described how transition professionals sustain transition planning within complex educational and community systems while navigating organizational constraints, fragmented service structures, and regional variation in resources. The findings illustrate that transition planning is not implemented within a uniform or stable system. Rather, it occurs through the daily actions of professionals who coordinate services, negotiate institutional limitations, and attempt to maintain student-centered practices within systems that are often constrained by capacity, policy structures, and geographic context.

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret these findings within the broader body of research on secondary transition planning. While Chapter 4 focused on describing participants' experiences, Chapter 5 situates those findings within existing literature and conceptual frameworks discussed in Chapter 2. In doing so, this chapter examines how the study's findings

both align with and extend previous research on transition implementation. Additionally, this chapter discusses implications for practice, policy, and professional preparation, particularly for transition coordinators and consultants working in geographically diverse regions such as the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and reflections on the limitations of the study.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The findings of this study illustrate the complex and often informal nature of transition planning implementation across the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. Analysis of participant interviews resulted in five themes that describe how transition professionals navigate the intersection of policy expectations, organizational structures, and regional conditions when implementing transition services for students with disabilities.

Participants frequently described functioning as central coordinators responsible for sustaining transition systems across schools, families, and community agencies. Although these professionals played a key role in maintaining communication and coordinating services, many reported doing so without formal authority to direct these systems. As a result, continuity within transition planning often depended on individual professionals maintaining relationships, monitoring processes, and ensuring that services and opportunities did not lapse.

Transition planning was also consistently anchored within the Individualized Education Program (IEP), which participants described as the primary structural mechanism for organizing transition goals, services, and compliance requirements. While the IEP served as an essential framework for documenting transition plans, participants emphasized that meaningful implementation often occurred outside the formal document. Capacity constraints, including

limited staffing, competing responsibilities, and restricted time, frequently shaped what could realistically be implemented.

Participants also expressed a strong professional commitment to student-centered planning while simultaneously navigating structural barriers that limited individualized opportunities. Transition professionals described prioritizing student voice, interests, and preferences when developing transition plans. However, systemic constraints such as scheduling limitations, staffing shortages, transportation barriers, and program sustainability challenges often restricted the extent to which individualized plans could be implemented as intended.

Another theme involved the significant role transition professionals played in supporting families as they navigated fragmented adult service systems. Participants frequently described acting as intermediaries between families and adult agencies, helping families understand eligibility requirements, timelines, and service options. This work involved not only logistical coordination but also substantial emotional labor as professionals supported families facing uncertainty about postschool services.

Finally, participants described substantial regional and contextual variation in access to transition opportunities across the Capital Area Region. Factors such as district resources, rurality, county service systems, and proximity to employers or community agencies influenced the availability of transition supports. As a result, students with similar needs and aspirations often experienced markedly different opportunities depending on where they lived and attended school.

Taken together, these findings highlight how transition planning implementation is shaped not only by professional knowledge or policy mandates, but also by systemic conditions and contextual factors that influence how services can be delivered in practice. The themes

illustrate that transition planning in the Capital Area Region operates as a dynamic and relationship-driven process sustained by professionals working within capacity-constrained and geographically uneven systems. Collectively, these findings address the study's research questions by illuminating the experiences of transition professionals, identifying the systemic challenges that influence implementation, and highlighting areas where practice and policy may be strengthened.

## **Discussion**

### **Theme 1: Holding the Transition System Together Without Authority**

The first theme identified in this study, holding the transition system together without authority, reflects participants' descriptions of serving as informal coordinators across fragmented educational and adult service systems. Transition professionals described sustaining communication among schools, families, and external agencies while often lacking the formal authority necessary to direct these systems or ensure consistent follow-through. Participants frequently discussed the responsibility of maintaining relationships, coordinating services, and bridging communication gaps between stakeholders in order to keep transition processes moving forward.

Prior research has similarly emphasized the complexity of coordinating transition services across multiple systems. Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming identifies interagency collaboration as a central component of effective transition services, highlighting the importance of coordinated partnerships among schools, vocational rehabilitation agencies, families, and community organizations (Kohler et al., 2016). The literature consistently emphasizes that successful transition planning depends on collaborative relationships among educators, families, and community partners working toward shared goals for students'

postsecondary outcomes (Kester et al., 2022). However, research also suggests that sustaining these collaborative partnerships can be difficult in practice. Zhang et al. (2023) found that educators and vocational rehabilitation professionals frequently encounter barriers such as inconsistent communication, misaligned service timelines, and unclear expectations when attempting to coordinate services across systems.

Additional research highlights broader structural challenges that complicate the implementation of coordinated transition services. Plotner and Morningstar (2016) identified ongoing concerns related to the organization and implementation of transition programming, noting that inconsistencies in professional preparation and system structures can hinder the effective delivery of transition services. Similarly, Brown et al. (2023) reported that many school administrators feel underprepared to support transition planning and interagency collaboration, which can limit the development of coordinated systems within districts. These findings reflect broader concerns within the transition literature regarding the persistent gap between recommended transition practices and the realities of implementation within school systems (Test et al., 2015; Snell-Rood et al., 2020).

Findings from the present study extend this body of research by illustrating how transition professionals often function as informal system stabilizers within capacity-constrained environments. Participants described absorbing communication gaps, coordinating agency involvement, and maintaining relationships with families and community partners in order to ensure that transition processes continued moving forward. In several cases, participants described transition systems that lacked clearly defined procedures or consistent structures, meaning that continuity often depended on the sustained efforts of individual professionals rather than formal organizational processes. While policy frameworks emphasize coordinated planning

and shared responsibility across agencies, the experiences described by participants suggest that the stability of transition systems frequently relies on the relational and organizational work of professionals operating without formal authority. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening organizational structures, clarifying professional roles, and developing more consistent mechanisms for collaboration in order to support equitable transition planning across districts and communities.

### **Theme 2: IEP-Centered Planning in Capacity-Constrained Systems**

The second theme identified in this study, IEP-centered planning in capacity-constrained systems, reflects participants' descriptions of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) as the primary structure guiding transition planning. Participants consistently described the IEP as the central mechanism through which transition goals, services, and responsibilities are formally documented and coordinated. At the same time, participants emphasized that the effectiveness of transition planning often depended on system capacity, including available staffing, time, and access to community resources. These constraints shaped how transition planning was implemented within districts and influenced the extent to which plans could be individualized and enacted.

The central role of the IEP in transition planning is well established in the literature. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), transition services must be incorporated into the IEP and guided by measurable postsecondary goals and age-appropriate transition assessments. These goals must address postsecondary education or training, employment, and, when appropriate, independent living (Martin et al., 2007). Federal accountability measures such as Indicator 13 further reinforce this requirement by evaluating whether key transition components are appropriately documented in students' IEPs (U.S.

Department of Education, 2023). Together, these policies position the IEP as the formal document through which transition goals, services, and responsibilities are recorded and monitored during the secondary school years.

Despite this policy emphasis, research suggests that the quality and impact of transition planning within IEPs varies considerably in practice. Test et al. (2009) found that IEPs frequently include transition components that are vague, generic, or insufficiently aligned with assessment data and student goals. Similarly, Snell-Rood et al. (2020) reported that transition goals are often outdated or disconnected from measurable objectives, limiting their effectiveness in guiding services and supports. Gaumer Erickson et al. (2013) further noted that strong compliance with Indicator 13 requirements does not necessarily translate into improved postschool employment outcomes, highlighting a persistent tension between procedural compliance and meaningful transition planning.

Research also points to broader structural conditions that influence how transition planning is implemented within school systems. Brown et al. (2023) reported that many school administrators lack familiarity with transition-related indicators and evidence-based practices, which can limit their ability to support comprehensive transition programming within districts. Similarly, Kohler et al. (2016) emphasize that effective transition planning depends not only on student-focused planning but also on program structure and interagency collaboration. When these broader supports are limited, the implementation of transition planning may become less consistent and more dependent on the capacity of individual educators and transition professionals.

Findings from the present study both align with and extend this body of research. Participants consistently described the IEP as the central organizing framework for transition

planning, serving as the primary location where goals, services, and responsibilities were documented. However, participants also emphasized that much of the practical work of transition planning occurred outside formal IEP meetings. Activities such as coordinating services with agencies, communicating with families, arranging work-based learning opportunities, and navigating logistical challenges were described as essential components of transition planning that were not always visible within formal documentation.

Participants also described how system capacity shaped the implementation of transition plans in practice. Time limitations, staffing shortages, and competing responsibilities frequently influenced whether transition goals could be fully enacted. In many cases, participants described holding multiple roles within their districts, limiting their ability to attend IEP meetings, follow through on goals, or consistently support students across settings. Logistical barriers such as transportation limitations, rigid academic schedules, and limited staffing for job coaching or community-based instruction were also identified as factors that restricted access to real-world transition experiences.

These findings highlight a recurring tension between planning and implementation. While participants invested substantial effort in developing high-quality and legally defensible transition plans, the ability to carry out those plans often depended on available resources and organizational support. In this way, the IEP functioned as a necessary compliance framework for documenting transition planning, but the effectiveness of those plans depended heavily on the systems and resources available to bring them to life. These findings emphasize the importance of strengthening system capacity and organizational support so that the IEP can function not only as a compliance document but also as a meaningful tool for guiding transition planning and postsecondary preparation.

**Theme 3: Student-Centered Intentions vs. Structural Reality**

The third theme identified in this study, student-centered intentions versus structural reality, reflects participants' descriptions of their strong commitment to individualized transition planning alongside the systemic barriers that often limited the realization of those intentions. Transition professionals consistently emphasized the importance of centering transition planning on students' strengths, interests, and preferences. However, participants also described navigating structural conditions that frequently constrained their ability to fully individualize transition experiences. As a result, transition plans often reflected a balance between student aspirations and the practical limitations of available programs, staffing, and community resources.

The importance of student-centered planning is well established within the transition literature. Federal transition requirements emphasize that planning should be guided by students' strengths, preferences, and interests and should prepare students for meaningful postsecondary outcomes (IDEA, 2004; Martin et al., 2007). Evidence-based practices in transition planning also highlight the importance of actively involving students in goal setting, decision-making, and the development of their transition plans (Test et al., 2009). Similarly, research on self-determination emphasizes that when students are supported in identifying their goals and participating in planning processes, they are more likely to experience positive postschool outcomes (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2013). These perspectives collectively emphasize that transition planning should prioritize student voice and individualized pathways rather than standardized or program-driven approaches.

Research also highlights the importance of aligning transition services with predictors of postschool success. Mazzotti et al. (2016) identified several evidence-based predictors associated

with improved outcomes for students with disabilities, including student involvement in the IEP process, work-based learning experiences, and opportunities for career exploration. Similarly, Kester et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of individualized transition planning processes that support students in identifying meaningful postsecondary pathways and connecting with appropriate educational, employment, and community supports. Together, this body of research reinforces the importance of designing transition plans that reflect the unique goals and interests of each student.

While these principles emphasize individualized planning, the findings from the present study suggest that structural conditions within school systems often shape how student-centered practices can be implemented in practice. Participants consistently described prioritizing student voice and attempting to align transition goals with individual interests. However, they also noted that the availability of programs, staffing, transportation, and scheduling flexibility frequently limited the range of opportunities that could realistically be offered. In these contexts, transition professionals often worked to adapt students' plans to fit within existing systems rather than developing entirely individualized pathways.

Participants also described the tension that emerged when students' interests did not align with available opportunities. For example, participants reported situations in which students expressed interest in specific career pathways or community experiences that could not be accommodated due to logistical barriers or program limitations. In these cases, professionals often worked to identify alternative opportunities that approximated students' goals while remaining feasible within existing constraints. While these adaptations allowed transition planning to continue moving forward, they also reflected the ways in which systemic conditions could shape or limit the realization of student-centered planning.

These findings both align with and extend existing transition literature. While research consistently emphasizes the importance of student voice and individualized planning, the experiences described by participants illustrate how structural realities within school systems can influence how those principles are implemented. Participants in this study demonstrated strong professional commitments to student-centered practices; however, their ability to enact those practices was frequently shaped by organizational capacity and resource availability. These findings highlight the importance of addressing systemic barriers in order to fully support student-centered transition planning and ensure that students' interests and aspirations can be translated into meaningful opportunities and experiences.

#### **Theme 4: Navigating Families and Fragmented Adult Systems**

The fourth theme identified in this study, navigating families and fragmented adult systems, reflects participants' descriptions of supporting families as they attempted to understand and access adult service systems during the transition process. Transition professionals frequently described serving as intermediaries between families and agencies responsible for postsecondary supports, including vocational rehabilitation services, county intellectual and developmental disability systems, and community-based employment programs. Participants emphasized that many families were unfamiliar with these systems and often relied on transition professionals to help interpret requirements, timelines, and service options.

The importance of family engagement in transition planning is well established in the literature. Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming identifies family involvement as a critical component of effective transition services, emphasizing that families play an essential role in helping students plan for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living (Kohler et al., 2016). Similarly, Test et al. (2009) identified family participation as one of the

evidence-based predictors associated with improved postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. These perspectives highlight the importance of ensuring that families are informed, supported, and actively engaged in the transition planning process.

Research also highlights the complexity of navigating adult service systems during the transition process. Plotner and Morningstar (2016) note that transition planning often requires coordination among multiple agencies with differing eligibility requirements, timelines, and service structures. Similarly, Kester et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of coordinated collaboration among schools, agencies, and families in order to ensure that students experience continuity of support as they move from school-based services to adult systems. Without effective coordination, families may struggle to access services or understand how different systems interact.

Despite these recommendations, research suggests that many families encounter challenges when navigating adult service systems. Snell-Rood et al. (2020) describe how families often experience confusion related to eligibility requirements, waiting lists, and service availability, particularly when multiple agencies are involved. These barriers can create uncertainty for families as they attempt to plan for their child's postschool future and may contribute to uneven access to transition supports across communities.

Findings from the present study align with and extend this body of research. Participants consistently described supporting families as they navigated unfamiliar and often fragmented adult service systems. In many cases, professionals served as the primary source of information about agency requirements, application processes, and available services. Participants described helping families interpret eligibility criteria, complete documentation, and connect with relevant agencies in order to facilitate access to postschool supports.

Participants also emphasized that this work frequently involved significant relational and emotional labor. Professionals described supporting families who were experiencing anxiety, uncertainty, or frustration as they attempted to understand what services would be available after graduation. In these contexts, transition professionals often functioned not only as coordinators of services but also as trusted guides helping families navigate complex systems. These findings highlight the central role that transition professionals play in bridging communication between schools, families, and adult service agencies and highlight the importance of strengthening interagency coordination and family support structures within transition systems.

### **Theme 5: Geography, Setting, and Unequal Access**

The fifth theme identified in this study, *geography, setting, and unequal access*, reflects participants' descriptions of how regional and contextual factors shaped the availability of transition opportunities for students with disabilities. Transition professionals consistently noted that access to employment experiences, community partnerships, and adult services varied significantly depending on district resources, geographic location, and proximity to community agencies or employers. Participants described how these contextual factors influenced the types of transition experiences that could realistically be offered to students within different districts and communities.

The influence of contextual factors on transition services is recognized within the broader transition literature. Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming emphasizes that effective transition planning depends not only on student-focused planning but also on program structure and interagency collaboration within local communities (Kohler et al., 2016). These elements are often shaped by the resources and partnerships available within a given region. As a result, districts with stronger connections to community agencies, employers, and postsecondary

institutions may be better positioned to offer diverse transition opportunities than districts with more limited access to these supports.

Research also suggests that contextual factors such as district resources, staffing capacity, and community partnerships can influence how transition services are implemented across school systems. Plotner and Morningstar (2016) note that transition programming often varies across districts due to differences in organizational structures and available community partnerships. Similarly, Brown et al. (2023) report that administrative capacity and resource allocation can shape the extent to which schools are able to support comprehensive transition programming. Together, these findings suggest that local context plays a significant role in determining what transition opportunities are available to students within different districts and communities.

These patterns are also reflected in research on predictors of postschool success. Mazzotti et al. (2016) identify experiences such as paid employment, career exploration, and work-based learning as key predictors of improved postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. However, the availability of these experiences often depends on the presence of community partnerships, transportation options, and local employment opportunities. When these resources are unevenly distributed across regions, students' access to evidence-based transition practices may vary depending on where they attend school.

Research also highlights how structural barriers can affect the consistency of transition services across communities. Snell-Rood et al. (2020) describe how limitations in service coordination, access to community opportunities, and logistical barriers can influence how transition planning is implemented within schools. These barriers may contribute to variability in the types of transition supports available to students across different districts and communities.

Findings from the present study align with and extend this body of research by illustrating how transition professionals experience these regional differences in practice. Participants described working within districts that varied significantly in terms of staffing levels, community partnerships, transportation availability, and proximity to employment opportunities. In some settings, participants reported access to strong partnerships with local businesses, postsecondary institutions, and community agencies that supported a wide range of transition experiences. In other contexts, participants described more limited opportunities due to geographic isolation, fewer local employers, or reduced agency presence.

Participants also noted that these contextual differences could influence students' access to work-based learning experiences, career exploration opportunities, and adult service connections. Even when transition goals were clearly articulated within students' IEPs, the availability of community resources often shaped what opportunities could realistically be provided. As a result, students with similar interests and goals sometimes experienced different transition pathways depending on the geographic and organizational context of their school district.

These findings highlight the role that regional context plays in shaping the implementation of transition services. While transition policies and best practices emphasize individualized planning and equitable access to opportunities, the experiences described by participants suggest that geographic and systemic factors can influence the range of supports available to students. Addressing these disparities may require increased collaboration across districts, expanded community partnerships, and broader policy attention to regional differences in transition service infrastructure.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for educators, transition coordinators, administrators, and community partners responsible for supporting transition planning for students with disabilities. Participants' experiences highlighted both the strengths of current transition practices and the systemic conditions that shape how those practices are implemented within schools and communities. Taken together, the themes identified in this study suggest that strengthening transition services requires attention not only to compliance requirements but also to the systems, structures, and partnerships that support meaningful implementation.

First, the findings emphasize the importance of clearly defined roles for transition professionals within school systems. Participants frequently described serving as informal coordinators responsible for maintaining communication among school teams, families, and community agencies, often without formal authority or clearly established structures. Many professionals described assuming responsibilities that extended beyond their formal job descriptions in order to ensure that transition planning continued moving forward. While these efforts reflected strong professional commitment, relying on individual initiative rather than formal systems can create vulnerability when staffing changes occur or workloads increase. Schools and districts may benefit from clarifying transition-related responsibilities, establishing consistent procedures for coordinating services, and ensuring that transition roles are supported through appropriate staffing and administrative recognition.

Second, the findings suggest a need to strengthen organizational capacity to support meaningful transition implementation. Although the IEP served as the central framework for documenting transition plans, participants consistently described limitations related to staffing,

time, transportation, and scheduling that affected the ability to fully implement those plans. In many cases, professionals described balancing multiple responsibilities while also coordinating work-based learning experiences, agency collaboration, and individualized transition planning. These constraints often required professionals to adapt transition goals to fit available resources rather than fully individualized student pathways. Addressing these challenges may involve increasing staffing dedicated to transition programming, developing flexible scheduling structures that allow students to participate in community-based learning experiences, and expanding logistical supports such as transportation for work-based learning and career exploration activities.

Next, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening supports for families as they navigate adult service systems. Participants frequently described serving as primary guides for families attempting to understand eligibility requirements, service timelines, and available postschool supports. While this guidance is an important component of transition planning, the complexity of adult service systems can create significant stress for families and increase the workload for school-based professionals. Schools and regional transition networks may benefit from developing clearer informational resources, offering structured family workshops, and strengthening partnerships with adult agencies in order to help families navigate these systems more effectively.

Expanding community partnerships is another important consideration for strengthening transition services. Participants consistently identified relationships with local employers, agencies, and postsecondary institutions as critical components of meaningful transition experiences. However, access to these partnerships varied across districts depending on available resources and geographic context. Strengthening relationships with local employers, workforce

development agencies, and community organizations may help expand opportunities for students to engage in career exploration and employment experiences during their secondary school years.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of regional collaboration among schools and transition professionals. Participants described substantial variability in the resources, partnerships, and opportunities available across districts within the Capital Area Region. Collaborative networks such as regional transition councils can play an important role in strengthening transition systems by providing opportunities for professionals to share resources, coordinate partnerships, and address common implementation challenges. Within the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania, the Capital Area Regional Transition Council (CART) serves as one example of a regional collaborative structure that brings together educators, agency representatives, and community partners to support transition planning efforts. Participants' descriptions of regional variability in resources and partnerships suggest that networks such as CART may help professionals navigate these differences by facilitating communication, sharing best practices, and strengthening connections across districts and agencies.

Together, these implications suggest that improving transition outcomes for students with disabilities requires attention to both individual professional practice and broader organizational systems. While transition professionals play a critical role in coordinating services and supporting students and families, their effectiveness depends on the structures and supports available within their schools and communities. Strengthening these systems may help ensure that transition planning moves beyond compliance requirements and more consistently supports meaningful postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

### **Implications for Policy and Systems**

In addition to implications for professional practice, the findings of this study suggest several broader considerations for policy and system-level decision-making related to transition services for students with disabilities. Participants' experiences illustrate that transition planning is shaped not only by professional knowledge or compliance requirements but also by the organizational structures, staffing patterns, and regional systems that support implementation. Strengthening transition outcomes may therefore require attention to policy decisions that influence how transition services are organized, resourced, and coordinated across educational and community systems.

One important policy implication involves the structure and support of transition-focused roles within school systems. Participants frequently described assuming coordination responsibilities that extended beyond their formal job descriptions, particularly in districts where transition planning depended on a single professional maintaining communication among educators, families, and agencies. While many professionals demonstrated strong commitment to sustaining these systems, relying on informal coordination rather than clearly defined roles can create instability when staffing changes occur or workloads increase. Policymakers and educational leaders may benefit from examining staffing structures, role definitions, and workload expectations to ensure that transition coordination responsibilities are supported through sustainable organizational systems.

A second policy consideration involves the relationship between compliance requirements and meaningful transition implementation. Federal and state accountability systems emphasize the presence of required transition components within the IEP, particularly through monitoring indicators such as Indicator 13. While these measures are important for ensuring that

transition planning occurs, participants' experiences suggest that compliance with documentation requirements does not always translate into meaningful transition opportunities for students.

Policy discussions may therefore benefit from continued attention to how accountability systems can support not only procedural compliance but also the quality and implementation of transition services.

The findings also highlight the importance of strengthening interagency collaboration between schools and adult service systems. Participants frequently described supporting families as they navigated complex eligibility processes, service timelines, and agency requirements related to postsecondary supports. These experiences suggest that stronger coordination between educational systems and adult service agencies may help reduce confusion for families and improve continuity of support as students exit secondary school. Policy initiatives that promote shared communication structures, coordinated planning processes, and cross-agency collaboration may help strengthen transition systems across communities.

Finally, the findings point to the importance of considering regional variability in access to transition opportunities. Participants described significant differences in community partnerships, employment opportunities, and available resources across districts within the Capital Area Region. These variations often influenced the types of transition experiences that could be offered to students. Addressing these disparities may require policy attention to transportation infrastructure, workforce partnerships, and regional collaboration efforts that help ensure students across districts have access to meaningful transition opportunities regardless of geographic location.

Taken together, these policy implications highlight the importance of viewing transition planning as a system-level responsibility rather than solely an individual professional task. While

educators and transition coordinators play a critical role in supporting students and families, their effectiveness is shaped by the structures, resources, and partnerships available within their communities. Strengthening transition systems therefore requires attention to both the policies that guide transition planning and the organizational conditions that support its implementation.

### **Contributions to the Literature**

This study contributes to the growing body of research on transition planning implementation for students with disabilities by providing insight into how transition services are experienced and enacted by professionals working within a specific regional context. While existing literature has identified evidence-based practices and policy frameworks intended to guide transition planning, less research has examined how those practices are implemented within the organizational and systemic conditions that shape everyday professional work. By focusing on the experiences of transition professionals across the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania, this study offers a more detailed understanding of how transition planning is sustained within complex educational and community systems.

One important contribution of this study involves highlighting the central role that transition professionals play in sustaining transition systems across schools, families, and community agencies. While prior research has emphasized the importance of interagency collaboration and coordinated planning (Kohler et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009), the findings of this study suggest that these collaborative systems often depend heavily on the efforts of individual professionals who maintain communication, coordinate services, and ensure continuity across stakeholders. Participants frequently described functioning as informal system connectors responsible for sustaining transition processes even in the absence of clearly defined structures or authority. These findings extend existing research by illustrating how transition

systems may operate in practice as relationship-driven networks sustained by professional persistence and coordination.

The findings also contribute to the literature by further illustrating the tension between procedural compliance and meaningful transition implementation. Prior research has documented concerns about the quality of transition components within IEPs and the potential gap between compliance requirements and meaningful outcomes (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2013; Snell-Rood et al., 2020). The findings of this study reinforce these concerns by demonstrating how transition professionals often invest substantial effort in developing compliant transition documentation while simultaneously navigating system constraints that limit the implementation of those plans. Participants described balancing legal requirements with practical limitations related to staffing, scheduling, transportation, and available community resources. These findings contribute to existing scholarship by highlighting how organizational capacity can shape the translation of transition plans into real-world experiences for students.

In addition, this study contributes to research on student-centered transition planning by illustrating how professionals attempt to prioritize student interests and goals while working within structural constraints. Existing literature emphasizes the importance of student voice, self-determination, and individualized planning processes in promoting successful postschool outcomes (Martin et al., 2007; Mazzotti et al., 2016). Participants in this study consistently expressed commitment to these principles and described efforts to align transition planning with students' strengths, interests, and aspirations. At the same time, the findings reveal how system structures, program availability, and logistical barriers may shape the range of opportunities available to students. These findings extend prior research by demonstrating how student-centered intentions are often negotiated within the practical realities of school systems.

Another contribution of this study involves providing insight into the complexity of family navigation within fragmented adult service systems. While previous research has identified the importance of family engagement in transition planning (Kohler et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009), participants' experiences highlight the significant role transition professionals play in guiding families through unfamiliar and often confusing service structures. Participants frequently described helping families interpret eligibility requirements, coordinate agency involvement, and prepare for changes in support following graduation. These findings provide additional insight into the relational and informational support that families may require during the transition process.

Finally, this study contributes to emerging conversations about the role of regional context in shaping transition service delivery. Participants described substantial variation in access to transition opportunities across districts within the Capital Area Region, influenced by factors such as local resources, community partnerships, transportation availability, and geographic location. These findings suggest that regional infrastructure and collaborative networks may play an important role in supporting transition planning across school systems. Within the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania, collaborative structures such as the Capital Area Regional Transition Council (CART) provide opportunities for educators, agency representatives, and community partners to share resources and coordinate transition efforts. While transition research often focuses on school-level practices, the findings of this study suggest that regional collaboration may represent an important but underexamined dimension of transition implementation.

Together, these contributions provide a more nuanced understanding of how transition planning is implemented within real-world educational systems. By examining the perspectives

of transition professionals across multiple districts and settings, this study highlights the dynamic interaction between policy expectations, organizational capacity, and regional context. These insights may help inform future research and support efforts to strengthen transition systems that promote meaningful postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with all qualitative research, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. These limitations do not diminish the value of the insights generated through this research but rather provide important context for understanding the scope and applicability of the findings.

One limitation involves the regional focus of the study. Participants were transition professionals working within the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania, and their experiences reflect the structures, partnerships, and resources present within this specific geographic context. While this regional focus allowed for an in-depth exploration of transition planning practices within a defined professional network, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of transition professionals working in other states or regions with different policy environments, service structures, or community resources.

Another limitation relates to the qualitative design of the study. The findings are based on participants' perspectives and experiences as shared through semi-structured interviews. While this approach allowed for rich descriptions of transition implementation, the data reflect participants' interpretations of their work rather than direct observations of transition practices within schools or community settings. As a result, the findings should be understood as representing professionals' perceptions of transition planning rather than an objective measurement of program effectiveness.

The composition of the participant sample also represents a limitation. This study focused specifically on transition professionals who hold roles related to transition coordination, consultation, or program development. Although these professionals play an important role in supporting transition planning across districts and agencies, the perspectives of special education teachers and case managers who develop and implement IEPs on a daily basis were not directly included in the study. Because case managers often play a central role in writing transition goals and coordinating services within the IEP process, their experiences may provide additional insight into how transition planning is implemented within classrooms and school teams.

Another limitation involves the timing and context of data collection. The interviews captured participants' perspectives on transition planning implementation at a particular point in time. Educational systems, staffing structures, policy priorities, and community partnerships may evolve over time, which could influence how transition services are implemented in the future. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting participants' experiences within the specific organizational and regional conditions present during the period in which the study was conducted.

Finally, the study is subject to the interpretive nature of qualitative research. As the researcher engaged in coding, memo writing, and theme development, interpretation played an important role in identifying patterns across participant responses. Strategies such as iterative coding, constant comparison, and memo development were used to ensure that themes remained grounded in the data. Nevertheless, the interpretation of findings reflects the researcher's analytical perspective.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into how transition planning is experienced and implemented by professionals working within a regional transition system.

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the organizational, relational, and contextual factors that shape transition practices and highlight important areas for continued research and system development.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study provide insight into how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning within a regional educational context. While the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how transition systems operate in practice, it also highlights several areas where additional research may further expand knowledge related to transition service delivery and implementation.

One important direction for future research involves examining transition planning from the perspectives of additional stakeholders involved in the transition process. This study focused specifically on transition professionals responsible for coordinating services and supporting planning efforts across districts and agencies. However, other individuals, including special education teachers, case managers, administrators, students, families, and agency representatives, play critical roles in the development and implementation of transition plans. Future research that incorporates these perspectives may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how transition planning functions across school teams and community systems.

Future studies may also benefit from examining transition planning implementation across different geographic regions. Because this study focused on professionals working within the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania, the findings reflect the structures, partnerships, and resources present within that particular regional context. Research conducted in other regions or states may help identify how differences in policy environments, service systems, and community resources influence the implementation of transition planning. Comparative studies

examining transition practices across multiple regions may also provide insight into how geographic and organizational contexts shape transition service delivery.

Another area for future research involves examining the role of regional collaboration in supporting transition systems. Participants in this study frequently described the importance of professional networks, agency relationships, and regional partnerships in sustaining transition planning across districts. Collaborative structures such as regional transition councils may play an important role in facilitating communication, sharing resources, and strengthening coordination among schools and community agencies. Additional research exploring how regional networks influence the implementation of transition services may provide valuable insight into strategies for strengthening collaboration and reducing disparities in access to transition opportunities.

Future research may also explore organizational and staffing structures that support effective transition implementation within school systems. Participants in this study described balancing multiple responsibilities while also coordinating transition services, suggesting that system capacity and staffing models may influence the extent to which transition plans can be fully implemented. Studies examining how different staffing structures, role definitions, and administrative supports affect transition programming may help identify organizational practices that strengthen transition systems within schools and districts.

Finally, additional research may examine how system capacity and community resources influence students' access to work-based learning, career exploration, and postsecondary preparation opportunities. Participants described how factors such as transportation availability, employer partnerships, and program resources influenced the transition experiences available to students. Future studies exploring these systemic and logistical factors may help identify

strategies for expanding equitable access to meaningful transition opportunities across diverse communities.

Together, these directions for future research highlight the need for continued examination of how transition planning is implemented within complex educational and community systems. Expanding research across multiple perspectives, regions, and organizational contexts may help strengthen understanding of the factors that support effective transition services and ultimately improve postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. Through a constructivist grounded theory approach, the findings revealed that transition planning is not implemented within a stable or uniform system, but rather through the ongoing efforts of professionals who navigate complex, capacity-constrained, and regionally variable contexts.

Across the five themes presented in this study, a consistent pattern emerged: transition professionals serve as central connectors within systems that lack formal coordination, sufficient capacity, and consistent access to resources. Participants described sustaining transition processes through relationship-building, problem-solving, and persistence, often without formal authority or structural support. While the IEP provided a necessary framework for documenting transition planning, meaningful implementation extended beyond compliance and depended heavily on available resources, partnerships, and organizational conditions.

The findings also highlight a critical tension between student-centered intentions and systemic realities. Transition professionals demonstrated a strong commitment to individualized,

student-driven planning; however, their ability to fully realize these goals was frequently shaped by logistical barriers, including staffing limitations, transportation challenges, and uneven access to community opportunities. Participants also described the significant role they play in supporting families as they navigate fragmented adult service systems, reinforcing the relational and coordination-intensive nature of transition work.

This tension is further shaped by regional context. Differences in district resources, geographic location, and access to community partnerships contributed to unequal access to transition opportunities for students across the region. As a result, students with similar needs and goals often experienced different transition pathways depending on where they lived and attended school.

Taken together, these findings suggest that transition planning is not a fixed or uniform process, but one that is shaped by the systems, resources, and conditions within each setting. Improving transition outcomes therefore requires attention not only to compliance and individual professional practice, but also to the organizational structures, interagency partnerships, and regional systems that support implementation. Strengthening these systems may help ensure that transition planning more consistently leads to meaningful postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

#### Introduction Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I'm conducting a study to better understand how transition professionals experience the implementation of transition planning practices for students with disabilities in the Capital Area Region of Pennsylvania. Your insights will help illuminate current practices, challenges, and areas of need in our region.

This interview should take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Please know that your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. Your responses will be kept confidential, and all identifying information will be removed from the final report.

Do I have your permission to begin the recording?

#### Interview Questions

##### 1. Background and Role

- Please describe your current role and responsibilities related to transition planning?
- What types of setting do you work in (e.g., district, IU, rural/suburban/urban)?
- How long have you worked in this role?

##### 2. Implementation of Transition Practices

- How would you describe your experience implementing transition planning practices in your current role?
- What does effective transition planning look like in your setting?

- How do you ensure that transition services are individualized and student-centered?

### **3. Best Practices and Successes**

- What strategies or practices have you found most successful in supporting students' post-school outcomes?
- Please share an example of a time when transition planning worked really well for a student or team.

### **4. Barriers and Challenges**

- What are some of the biggest challenges you face when trying to implement high-quality transition services?
- Explain any particular barriers related to staffing, interagency collaboration, family involvement, or student engagement you have experienced.

### **5. Systems and Context**

- How does your district or region's structure influence how transition planning is carried out?
- In what ways do policies, leadership, or local resources impact your ability to deliver effective services?

### **6. Reflection and Improvement**

- If you could change one thing about how transition planning is implemented in your region, what would it be?
- What supports do you wish were more available to help you in your role?

### **7. Closing**

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences with transition planning that we haven't already discussed?

**Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire****Instructions:**

Please complete this short form to help describe the sample and support data analysis. Your answers will be de-identified and kept confidential.

1. **Name (for internal tracking only; will be de-identified):** \_\_\_\_\_
2. **Current Job Title:**
  - Transition Coordinator
  - Transition Consultant
  - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
3. **Primary Employer Type:**
  - School District (LEA)
  - Intermediate Unit
  - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
4. **Years of Experience in Transition Planning:**
  - 1–3 years
  - 4–6 years
  - 7–10 years
  - More than 10 years
5. **Number of School Districts Served (if applicable):**
  - 1
  - 2–3
  - 4–6
  - More than 6
6. **Geographic Region(s) Served (check all that apply):**
  - Rural
  - Suburban
  - Urban
  - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
7. **Estimated Number of Students with IEPs You Directly Support Each Year:**
  - Fewer than 25
  - 25–50
  - 51–100
  - More than 100
8. **Do you currently participate in the Capital Area Regional Transition (CART) Community of Practice?**
  - Yes
  - No

**9. Please list any additional roles or responsibilities related to transition that you hold (e.g., committee work, program development):**

**10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your professional background in transition services?**