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A Mixed Methods Approach to Investigating How Special Education Teachers and School Psychologists Incorporate Socioeconomic Status in Middle to High School Transition Planning for Students With Disabilities

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 mandates that students with disabilities receive transition planning and services to support successful postsecondary transitions; however, these postsecondary transitions are not the only significant transitions for these students. Another critical transition occurs from middle to high school, which can be particularly challenging for many adolescents due to newfound independence, increased organizational demands, and higher academic expectations. Despite the importance of this transition, there is a notable scarcity of research focusing on the need for support during the middle to high school transition. Even fewer studies have examined how school psychologists and special education teachers, also known as case carriers, consider sociocultural factors such as socioeconomic status (SES) when helping students with disabilities transition to the next phase of their education. These factors play a significant role in shaping behaviors and attitudes and influencing available

resources within the community. This study will employ a convergent mixed methods research design to investigate how school psychologists and special education teachers in middle and high schools incorporate student SES when planning transitions for students with disabilities and how they perceive the importance of the student's SES in this process.

Keywords: Transition Planning, Transition Services, Special Education, School Psychologist, Socioeconomic Status

Table of Contents

Introduction

Special education has evolved considerably, primarily driven by federal legislative mandates. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) was initially established to protect the rights of children with disabilities (Kritzer, 2012). EHA was subsequently renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and then the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (Briggs & Buenrostro, 2019). This act was reauthorized in 1990 and again in 2004 to address requirements related to "highly qualified" teachers and ensure greater accountability for the educational outcomes of students with disabilities (United States Department of Education, n.d.). IDEA has six major guiding principles that outline the intent of the federal mandate and promote inclusivity:(a) free and appropriate education (FAPE), (b) zero reject, (c) nondiscriminatory evaluation, (d) least restrictive environment (LRE), (e) procedural safeguards, and (f) parent participation (IDEA, 2004).

IDEA consists of four main parts. Part A defines the overarching purpose of IDEA. Part B specifies the conditions under which states receive federal funding and outlines educational guidelines for students with disabilities aged 3 through 21. Part C establishes guidelines for providing services to infants and toddlers (referred to as Early Start in California) and outlines the rights of their families. It also addresses the transition process for children entering special education at age 3. Finally, Part D details the activities, funding, and programs to enhance educational outcomes for students with disabilities and their families. This includes initiatives such as postsecondary transition planning (Briggs & Buenrostro, 2019; IDEA, 2004). Although IDEA/Part D is dedicated

to supporting students with disabilities during postsecondary transitions, it overlooks a significant phase: the transition from middle to high school. It is imperative that we address this transition, as it could provide services to help students with disabilities succeed in high school, significantly reducing the ninth-grade dropout rates and increasing their chances of staying in school until graduation.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2024) estimates that 7.5 million children and youth aged 3-21 received special education services during the 2022-23 academic year. To qualify for these services, students undergo a psychoeducational evaluation, which includes academic and cognitive assessments and social-emotional screenings administered by the school psychologist and special education teacher. This evaluation determines whether the student's educational performance is adversely affected by their disability (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). Currently, there are 13 disability categories (e.g., Other Health Impairment, Intellectual Disability, and Emotional Disturbance) under which a student may qualify (IDEA, 2018). Students who meet eligibility criteria receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a personalized roadmap that ensures they receive educational services tailored to their specific goals and needs. This support is designed to help them succeed both in K-12 education and in their postsecondary pursuits, with a strong emphasis on transition planning for life after high school.

Transition planning is a critical component of the IEP process because students with disabilities are more likely to have adverse postsecondary outcomes (e.g., low

employment rates), leading to reliance on public assistance (Social Security Administration, 2000). Transition services are defined under IDEA as:

> A coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. (Sec.300.43)

Federal guidelines stipulate that transition services must commence no later than the first IEP in place when the student turns 16 and potentially earlier if deemed appropriate by the IEP team. Furthermore, IDEA requires annual reviews and updates of the IEP to ensure its relevance and effectiveness in meeting the evolving needs of the student (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2020). Under federal legislation, IEPs are required to include suitable, measurable, postsecondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessments. These assessments must relate to training, education, employment, and, where applicable, independent living skills. Additionally, they must outline the transition services, including coursework, necessary to help the student achieve these goals (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2020).

During the transition planning process, special education professionals, such as school psychologists and special education teachers (also known as case carriers and resource teachers) are required to implement an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP). An ITP is a written plan that outlines services needed for a student with disabilities to succeed in postsecondary activities **(**Grigal & Hart, 1997, 2011; Repetto & Correa,1996).

Formulating the ITP is a collaborative process that includes the student, adult service providers, teachers, administrators, and parents (California State University, Los Angeles, n.d.). This comprehensive approach aims to enhance both the academic and functional achievements of students with disabilities, ensuring they are adequately prepared for life beyond the educational setting. However, federal guidelines and the ITP do not yet account for middle to high school transitions and sociocultural factors, such as SES when evaluating students' needs and designing transition support plans.

Literature Review

Transition from Middle to High School

The transition from middle to high school can be challenging for many adolescents, making it pivotal for academic performance but also essential for social integration and emotional well-being. The developmental transition between middle and late adolescence is cultural, physiological, social, environmental, and psychological (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Previous literature indicates that the move to high school involves adjustments to a more complex academic curriculum, greater demands for personal responsibility, and the need for more vital organizational skills (Alspaugh,1998; Benner, 2011; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Rice, 2001). Socially, students are forced to cut off their middle school friend group and navigate new peer groups, establish new identities within a larger and more diverse student population (Akos & Galaasi, 2004), and cope with increased social pressures. Students who can effectively navigate this social transition are more likely to have improved educational outcomes, higher levels of engagement, and better overall mental health (Alotaibi et al., 2023). Contrarily,

difficulties during this transition can lead to academic decline, increased absenteeism, and social isolation, leading to high ninth-grade dropout rates (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). The organizational structure of the high school is entirely different from middle school, which involves more extended class periods and school days and intricate class schedules.

Regardless of the growing challenges, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the number of students with disabilities who transition from middle to high school annually. This lack of data makes it difficult to conceptualize how many students face these challenges and quantify the number of students who drop out as a result. More research in this area could help ease these challenges, especially for students with disabilities. The transition to ninth grade can be incredibly challenging for students with disabilities if they don't have the proper resources to navigate high school. Students who face substantial academic challenges in ninth grade are more likely to feel discouraged, which can increase their likelihood of dropping out of high school. This phenomenon, often called the “9th Grade Shock,” emphasizes the importance of providing support and resources to students during this critical transition period (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). However, socioeconomic status and other sociocultural factors are frequently overlooked, which could hinder the effectiveness of transition planning.

Concepts of Sociocultural Factors, SES

Previous studies have shown that sociocultural factors influence academic achievement and overall success in life (Nyaga Mucee et al., 2014). SES is not just income but education level, job prestige, and individuals' perception of their social

standing and class. It represents the quality of life and the opportunities available to individuals in society and consistently predicts a wide range of psychological outcomes (American Psychological Association, 2007; Jeong et al., 2022; Saifi & Mehmood, 2011). SES is one of the most researched topics because many researchers state that if a family's financial ability and educational level are low, the student's needs are left unfilled, perpetuating the gap between education and those communities (Vadivel et al., 2023). Trainor (2008) argues that incorporating cultural characteristics into research on transition planning for students with disabilities is fundamental for meaningfully addressing the inequitable and adverse outcomes faced by marginalized groups.

SES significantly shapes the education system, influencing various aspects of a student's educational journey. For instance, families with lower SES are often less involved in school activities, while those with higher SES have the resources and opportunities to be more actively engaged (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Furthermore, families with lower SES may find themselves working extensively to provide for their families, which can lead to feelings of shame and guilt over their limited involvement in their child's education. This, in turn, often results in reduced communication with teachers and further isolation from the school community (Machen et al., 2005; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

Family incomes have shown to be related to transition planning. In a study conducted by Griffin et al. (2014), it was found that families with incomes of $50,000 or more were more actively involved in transition planning activities. Similarly, Wei et al. (2016) discovered that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder who engaged in

transition planning activities were less likely to come from low-income households, particularly those earning less than $25,000 per year. These findings suggest that higher income levels may facilitate greater parental involvement and support in educational planning, which could contribute to better student outcomes. By considering a student's SES (e.g., familial resources) school professionals can better anticipate potential challenges and offer more inclusive support throughout these processes. Conversely, lower-income families may face barriers that limit their ability to engage fully in these critical activities, potentially widening the gap in educational opportunities, such as transition planning and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Transition Planning Process

Zhang and Stecker (2001) conducted a study looking at self-determination and the importance of students attending their IEP meetings. They found that although teachers were aware of a student's interests and needs, these factors were often not incorporated into the transition planning process. The study also emphasized that transition planning is a collaborative process requiring input from both students and their families, including socioeconomic information such as educational attainment, family income, and available resources. A related study by Suk et al. (2020) examined whether states, territories (e.g., Guam, Puerto Rico, American Samoa), and entities (e.g., Washington, DC, and the Bureau of Indian Education) comply with federal mandates for providing transition services. The study revealed significant variability in the age at which services begin, with New York starting at age 12 and South Carolina at age 13, while most states and territories follow the federal mandate of starting at age 16. This variation in the timing of

services may have implications for the preparedness of students as they transition to postsecondary life. These findings emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to transition planning. Educators should not only focus on a student's academic and vocational goals but also ensure that the student's personal sociocultural context is considered. Furthermore, beginning transition services earlier, as seen in some states, may provide students with a more robust foundation as they prepare for the transition from middle to high school.

Successful Transition Planning Strategies

Successful transition planning strategies, as highlighted in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), focus on a coordinated, strengths-based approach supported by a team that fosters skill development. Hatfield et al. (2018) found that such strategies are particularly successful for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The study highlighted the importance of a collaborative team, which involves identifying supportive individuals who can offer guidance throughout the process. Incorporating these strategies can help address gaps identified in earlier studies by ensuring that transition planning is comprehensive and personalized. Fields (2011) conducted a survey exploring parental perspectives on successful transition planning for students with severe disabilities and provided recommendations based on the findings. The first recommendation aligns with Hatfield et al. (2018), emphasizing the importance of collaboration and ongoing guidance throughout the process. The second recommendation stressed the importance of planning for changes in a student's status per the information provided by the family. Conventional methods must only partially guide transition

planning activities; failure to incorporate necessary changes can harm students and negatively impact their academic trajectory.

Successful Transition Planning Strategies for Understanding SES. Previous literature brings attention to the importance of understanding SES during transition planning activities (Walters et al., 2010). However, more targeted studies are needed to examine how SES is understood and incorporated into these processes for the middle to high school transition. The Federal Youth Transition Plan (2015) emphasizes the need to consider SES, placing it on equal footing as disability status and other sociocultural factors that may impact youth transitions.

Role of School Psychologists in Transition Planning

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (2014) website describes school psychologists as:

> "Uniquely qualified members of school teams that support students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach. They apply expertise in mental health, learning, and behavior, to help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally School psychologists' partner with families, teachers, school administrators, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strength connections between home, school, and the community."

The role of school psychologists to transition planning is instrumental and is shared with special education teachers. Lillenstein et al. (2006) conducted a study comparing the involvement and perceptions of school psychologists and transition coordinators regarding school psychologist participation in transition activities. The results indicate that while school psychologists were familiar with some aspects of transition planning, they required additional information to effectively carry out transition activities. Nearly

half of the participants reported feeling unprepared to engage in transition activities, even though they had received training through professional development workshops (Lillenstein et al., 2006). Although school psychologists feel unprepared, transition coordinators expressed a desire for more involvement from them in the transition planning process. Moreover, the authors found that school psychologists conduct functional behavioral assessments and provide information regarding placement and support, a practice that aligns with the definition outlined by NASP (Lillenstein et al., 2006), thereby reinforcing the validity and reliability of the findings.

A similar follow-up study by Gelbar et al. (2021) involved a quantitative approach, sending out a statewide survey to school psychologists in the Northeast to assess their self-efficacy concerning transitions and the frequency of their involvement in secondary transition planning. Results showed that school psychologists reported being sometimes or always involved with activities like developing transition-related goals and objectives and helping students understand the nature of their disability (Gelbar et al., 2021). These results also showed that special educators and transition coordinators primarily lead the transitions. Gelbar et al. (2021) also suggested that the training and expertise of school psychologists could be leveraged to improve the outcomes of transition planning for students with disabilities.

Role of Special Education Teachers in Transition Planning

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA emphasized the importance of ensuring that special education teachers are fully qualified to work with students with disabilities (Shepherd et al., 2016; Li et al., 2009). These teachers play a crucial role in transition

planning for students with disabilities by collaborating with the special education team, advocating for the student, and ensuring that the student's needs are both considered and realistic. Often, they go above and beyond by working with additional service providers (Li et al., 2009). During the transition planning process, special education teachers are responsible for developing transition objectives and goals, as well as upholding the services and goals established in the IEP (Knott & Asselin, 1999). However, despite being tasked with such a critical aspect of the transition process, many special education teachers lack the necessary training, leading to low levels of preparedness. Benitez et al. (2009) conducted a study involving master's-level special education teachers to assess their preparedness to plan and deliver transition services for students with disabilities. The study found that, on average, these teachers had taken only one transition planning course at either the undergraduate or graduate level. This finding aligns with the teachers' survey responses regarding their preparedness for transition planning. Although a small number of participants had taken between one and four transition planning courses, most recognized the importance of participating in a multidisciplinary team and engaging in training as crucial to the transition planning process. Despite this, many special education teachers still reported feeling insufficiently competent when conducting these activities (Benitez et al., 2009).

Theoretical Foundation

The Ecological Framework for Human Development

Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological theory is a framework that hypothesizes that a person's development and behavior are shaped by their environment. This theory can be used to understand the middle to high school transition planning for students with disabilities. Bronfenbrenner's framework considers multiple levels of influence on a student's development and success. The first level is a microsystem, which includes the immediate environments where the student interacts directly (e.g., community settings, school, home) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). For example, in the microsystem, families, teachers, and special educators engage in the transition planning process to ensure the student is supported and advocate for their needs. The next level is the mesosystem. The mesosystem refers to the connections and interactions between the different microsystems. During the transition planning process, special educators organize meetings and planning sessions to align goals, share progress, and address challenges collectively. Additionally, special educators create partnerships between the school and local businesses and organizations for work-based learning opportunities and job training. Next is the exosystem, and this level incorporates external environments that indirectly influence the student's transition planning. Since transition planning is dictated by IDEA and the federal government, understanding and advocating for policies and laws that impact special education is essential. Furthermore, community resources such as job training and recreational programs need to be leveraged to support the student's development. Macrosystem consists of societal, cultural and economic contexts that

influence transition planning (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). This system integrates sociocultural factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES), into student development. By considering a student's family's SES, students are prepared for realistic opportunities starting in high school. Viewing this aspect through a cultural lens can address societal attitudes and stigmas surrounding disabilities, promote inclusion and equal opportunities, and smooth the transition. The final system is the chronosystem, which considers how historical events may impact a student's transition planning and potential opportunities.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's theory to the research on transition planning helps identify how school psychologists and special education teachers collaborate to incorporate student SES into the process and how prepared these professionals feel to support students by addressing student SES in transition planning.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), also known as Activity Theory, is a framework for studying human learning and development. It is closely associated with Russian psychologists Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev (Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition, 2010). The framework of CHAT is based on three core concepts: (1) humans collaborate, learn through experiences, and express themselves through actions; (2) humans create, use, and modify tools to facilitate learning and communication; and (3) the community plays a pivotal role in creating and interpreting meaning, making it essential to all forms of learning, communication, and action (Vygotsky, 1978). In the field of education, CHAT has been utilized to analyze complex learning environments and activity systems (Qureshi, 2021). Yamagata-Lynch (2010) defines a complex

learning environment as situations in natural settings where multiple individuals are involved in shared activities within a single or multi-organizational context.

Similar to Bronfenbrenner's social ecological theory, CHAT considers the cultural, historical, and societal contexts in which students with disabilities exist. Leveraging the social ecological theory, CHAT utilizes Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem to analyze historical interpersonal interactions between special education teachers, school psychologists, parents, and service providers. Furthermore, CHAT can investigate current practices in transition planning and use that information to identify research gaps. This approach can positively impact middle to high school transition planning for students with disabilities. CHAT comprises six components: (a) subject(s), (b) objects, (c) tools, (d) a community of other, (e) rules, and (f) division of labor (Qureshi, 2021).

To successfully integrate the CHAT framework into middle to high school transition planning, this study will consider the following:

1. The IEP and other educational materials are powerful tools that bridge the gap between the student's capabilities and future goals. We can feel more confident supporting the student's transition by utilizing these resources effectively.
2. Identify the student who needs transitioning planning and configure a team (e.g., parents, service providers, teachers, and school psychologists) with a common goal.
3. Analyze how transition planning activities have been historically divided among school psychologists and special education teachers is essential. This understanding will allow the team to feel more informed and prepared during the

transition process. Once the analysis is completed, the team will determine if the roles and responsibilities should remain the same for each team member.

4. CHAT's foundation is community-based, so during the transition meeting, the team should consider federal mandates (e.g., IDEA) and policies while being sensitive to the cultural and social norms of the student community.

CHAT addresses the research questions by examining how school psychologists and special education teachers' preparation variables (e.g., years of experience, educational qualifications, and professional development) serve as critical indicators for incorporating student SES into middle to high school transition planning for students with disabilities. CHAT will also highlight contradictions within the complex activity system, like differences in perceptions in preparedness among the two professional groups, responsibilities, and contextual factors.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the preparedness of school psychologists and special education teachers in incorporating sociocultural factors into middle to high school transition planning for students with disabilities. A critical challenge for the school system is creating a strategy to support the transition of students with disabilities from middle school to high school (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). This research aims to provide special education professionals with insights on how to better support students with disabilities during their transition to high school. Additionally, the study seeks to inform graduate-level programs on integrating SES considerations into transition

planning, thereby enhancing the support future special education teachers and school psychologists can offer. Given the limited research on SES and transition planning, the study will employ a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively capture how sociocultural factors, particularly SES, are incorporated into transition planning activities.

Significance of Study

This study aims to deepen our understanding of the middle to high school transition planning process, focusing specifically on how school psychologists and special education teachers can support students with disabilities by considering their SES. Students with disabilities are among the most vulnerable in schools, often facing challenges that extend into post-high school life. This marginalization can be compounded by socioeconomic factors, with lower SES students facing additional barriers. Higher SES is widely recognized as a predictor of greater access to opportunities, resources, and supportive environments. By addressing the intersectionality of disability and SES, this study will present more effective strategies that can be created to support students with disabilities by incorporating SES during their transition to high school.

While previous research has primarily focused on postsecondary transition planning and preparing students for life outcomes, there is a significant gap in studies examining the transition from middle to high school. This transition is a critical period for students with disabilities, and a deeper understanding of their needs, along with the urgent development of targeted support strategies, can play a crucial role in their success.

Research Questions

Quantitative:

1. To what extent do school psychologists and special education teachers feel prepared to incorporate student SES into transition planning for students with disabilities moving from middle to high school?
2. To what extent do school psychologists and special education teachers perceive student SES as a significant factor in the transition planning process for students with disabilities from middle to high school?
3. To what extent do preparation variables (e.g., years of experience, educational qualifications, and professional development) influence the perceived preparedness of school psychologists and special education teachers to incorporate student SES into transition planning for students with disabilities moving from middle to high school?

Qualitative:

1. How is student SES incorporated into the middle to high school transition planning process by special education teachers and school psychologists?
2. How is student SES perceived as a significant factor in the transition planning process for students with disabilities from middle to high school?
3. How do school psychologists and special education teachers perceive the influence of their preparation variables (e.g., years of experience, educational qualifications, and professional development) on the incorporation of student SES into middle to high school transition planning for students with disabilities?

4. How do special education teachers and school psychologists collaborate to incorporate student SES into middle to high school transition planning for students with disabilities?

Methods

Philosophical Assumptions Guiding Methodology

The interpretivist paradigm emphasizes that reality is not fixed but is constructed through social and cultural interactions. In this respect, the ontological assumption of the research would be that realities are multiple and are shaped by lived experiences and cultural markers (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). From an epistemological point of view, research takes a constructivist stance: knowledge results from interaction between the researcher and the participants. This view concurs with the purpose of the study since the latter intended to explore subjective experiences and perceptions; hence, both qualitative and quantitative inquiry becomes an intrinsic part of the methodological approach. Axiologically, the researcher recognizes the values and biases that researchers bring into the process of interpretation, which demands reflexivity in the course of the study. Lastly, methodologically, this study uses qualitative approaches, interviews, and reflective thematic analysis to understand the meanings participants give to experiences. This study will use a quantitative survey to explore the perceptions of preparedness of school psychologists and special education teachers.

Mixed Methods Rationale

Due to limited knowledge of this topic and special education professionals, this study will utilize a convergent mixed-methods design (QUAN + QUAL). A convergent mixed methods collects quantitative and qualitative data separately, and the collected data does not inform the additional stages of data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Katz-Buonincontro, 2024). This is primarily done so that the qualitative findings can be compared to the quantitative findings, allowing for a more complete understanding of the topic (Moseholm & Fetters, 2017) and for validation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The convergent research design intends to assemble the strengths and limitations of both the quantitative and qualitative methodology (Abowitz & Toole, 2010; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Quantitative methodology utilizing surveys with numerically rated questions can serve as a more accessible method of sampling the target population (Ponto, 2015). However, there are very few studies that look at the desired population. The results from the quantitative strand should supply information on the level of preparedness of school psychologists and special education and their perceptions of the importance of SES.

A convergent mixed methods design should provide enhanced comprehension of SES in the transition planning process from middle to high school for students with disabilities. The results from the qualitative strand should provide awareness into how school psychologists and special education teachers are incorporating SES into the transition planning process from middle to high school for students with disabilities. Additionally, the results from the qualitative portion should offer greater detail on how

preparation variables (i.e., professional development, years of experience, and educational qualifications) aid them in completing the crucial and necessary task of transition planning. Although quantitative methodology has inherent value, mixed methods research allows us to leverage the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, effectively addressing their limitations. The researcher selected this research design because it is desirable to have both quantitative and qualitative information from each participant, and it is efficient. The caseload for school psychologists and special education teachers is demanding and increasing as the school year goes on, making it challenging to complete data collection as time passes. Additionally, the participants can offer a complete perspective on lived experiences.

Population

This study's proposed population is practicing school psychologists and special education teachers at public middle and high schools in California, specifically Southern California. Southern California was selected due to its diverse population within the K-12 education system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The researcher will leverage existing relationships between the School Psychology department at the University of California, Riverside (UCR) and local school districts to recruit participants. Honing in on these established relationships will help build trust between the researcher and potential participants, potentially encouraging them to share the study's information with eligible professionals. Relationships are an important part of research and ultimately make the project (Mooney-Doyle & Deatrick, 2023).

Participants for the proposed study will be recruited through purposeful snowball sampling and the UCR School Psychology department's practicum site list. Additionally, the researcher will compile a list of special education departments within Southern California, along with relevant contact information. Once the list is finalized, the researcher will email the special education directors, including a link to the survey, and request that they forward it to special education teachers and school psychologists, if applicable. Purpose snowball sampling is a technique used to identify participants who meet the study criteria and possess relevant knowledge or experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; 2017). However, a limitation of snowball sampling is that participants tend to refer others with similar traits and perspectives (Chan, 2020), a concept known as the homophily principle of social network (Khanam et al., 2022). To facilitate purposeful snowballing, the researcher will create a flyer that includes a direct link to the anonymous Qualtrics survey. Anonymity may encourage participants to provide more accurate responses.

Both the quantitative and qualitative strands will draw from the same population. To qualify for this study, participants must currently serve as school psychologists or special education teachers and have the federal and state required certification to perform that role. The roles of school psychologists and special education teachers are crucial to this study, and their participation is highly valued. Participants for the proposed study will not be excluded based on demographics such as race and ethnicity. Participants will also have completed transition planning as part of the IEP and special education process.

The Quantitative Phase

Procedure

The Qualtrics survey will begin with pre-screening questions to determine participant eligibility. Pre-screening will include the following: (1) Are you a practicing school psychologist in a public middle or high school located in Southern California? (2) Are you a practicing special education teacher at a public middle or high school located in Southern California? (3) Have you completed transition planning as part of an IEP and the special education process? At the end of the pre-screening, individuals who do not qualify for the study will be thanked for their time and interest. They will also be prompted to share the study information (i.e., flyer and pre-screener) with others who may qualify. Qualified participants who answered yes to the pre-screening questions will be directed to a separate link. On the separate link, participants who qualify will be provided with an informed consent form, which will include information about the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study and the expected length of participation. Once participants provide consent, they will be asked to self-report demographic information (i.e., age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, job title [school psychologist or special education teacher], years of experience, level of education, and SES classification [i.e., low, middle, or high]). Following this, participants will respond to questions created by the researcher; prior to its full implementation, the survey will undergo a pilot test with a small group of participants to assess its reliability, clarity, and validity. The feedback obtained from this pilot test will be used to make any necessary revisions to ensure the instrument's effectiveness in capturing the desired information.

Instruments

Survey questions will be developed by the researcher, as no existing instrument specifically measures the perception of preparedness among practicing school psychologists and special education teachers regarding incorporating student SES in middle to high school transition planning for students with disabilities. The survey will be divided into three sections based on the topic of the questions. Sections will include *Preparedness for Transition Planning, Importance of SES, and Preparation Variables.*

Preparedness for Transition Planning. This section of questions will focus on how prepared school psychologists and special education teachers feel about incorporating student SES into transition planning for students with disabilities moving from middle to high school. A sample question is: How *prepared do you feel to consider a student's socioeconomic status when planning their transition from middle to high school?* Participants will indicate their level of preparation using a 5-point Likert scale (1= not at all prepared, 2= slightly prepared, 3= moderately prepared, 4= very prepared, and 5= extremely prepared). Another sample question is: *How confident are you in your ability to assess the impact of a student's socioeconomic status on their transition needs?* Participants will indicate confidence using a 5-point Likert scale (1=not confident at all, 2= slightly confident, 3= moderately confident, 4= very confident, and 5= extremely confident).

Importance of SES. This section of questions focuses on the perceived importance of SES for students in the middle to high school transition planning process for students with disabilities. For example, participants will be asked: *In your*

experience, how important is a student's SES when planning their transition from middle to high school? Another sample question is: *How frequently do you consider a student's SES when identifying supports and resources for students with disabilities during their transition to high school?* Participants will indicate the frequency using a Likert 5-point scale (e.g., 1= never, 2= rarely, 3=sometimes, 4= often, and 5= always).

Preparation Variables. This section of questions focuses on the preparation variables, including years of experience, educational qualifications, and professional development engagement. *Years of experience* is defined as the total length of time an individual has been in their current role. *Educational qualifications* refer to the certifications, degrees (e.g., associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate), and credentials (e.g., Education Specialist Instruction) that an individual has obtained through formal education. Basic information on educational qualifications and years of experience will be collected through demographic questions. *Professional development engagement* refers to an individual's active participation in activities or programs to enhance their professional skills, knowledge, and overall effectiveness. Sample questions for professional development include: *How frequently do you participate in professional development activities related to middle to high school transition planning?* Participants will indicate their response on a frequency scale (e.g., 1= never, 2=once a year, 3=twice a year, 4= quarterly, and 5= monthly). *How many total hours of professional development related to middle to high school transition planning have you completed in the past year?* Participants will choose from the following options (e.g., 1= 0-5 hours, 2= 6-10 hours, 3= 11-15 hours, 4= 16-20, 5= 21 or more). *Sample questions for educational qualifications*

include: Have you taken a graduate training course directly related to transition planning? Did those courses specifically address middle to high school transition planning? Did those courses specifically address incorporating student SES into middle to high school transition planning? Participants will indicate their responses (e.g., yes or no).

Analytic Plan

Following the completion of quantitative data collection, the first step will be data cleaning. This process involves identifying and addressing errors in the dataset, including handling missing values and incomplete survey submissions. Once the dataset is cleaned, descriptive statistics will be computed for independent and dependent variables. ANOVA will be used to compare the group means for the perceptions of student SES as a significant factor in transition planning and preparedness to incorporate student SES.

Multiple linear regression analyses will be conducted for the third quantitative research question, which examine the influence of preparation variables (e.g., years of experience, educational qualifications, and professional development engagement). This method is appropriate due to multiple explanatory variables (The Pennsylvania State University [PSU], 2018). Separate models will be run for each group, with the dependent variable being the perceived influence to incorporate student SES into transition planning and the independent variables being years of experience, educational qualifications, and engagement in professional development related to their job position. Regression diagnostics will be conducted to ensure that key assumptions such as normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity are met (Yang et al., 2019; PSU, 2018). For each analysis, potential

control variables such as respondents' demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, SES classification) will be included to account for additional variance.

Power Analysis

A power analysis was performed to establish the appropriate sample size for the proposed study. Using G*Power software, an a priori power analysis was conducted for linear multiple regression. The analysis was two-tailed, assuming a medium effect size of 0.15 (Cohen, 1988), a significance alpha level of 0.05, and a minimum power significance level of 0.80 (Ceran Serdar et al., 2020). Also, three predictors were included in the analysis. The results indicated that a sample size of 55 participants for both groups would be necessary.

The Qualitative Phase

Procedure

For the qualitative portion of the study, 20 participants, 10 school psychologists and 10 special education teachers, will be invited for interviews. Creswell (2013) suggests that in a phenomenological qualitative approach, a sample size between 5 and 25 participants is adequate to capture the essence of the studied lived experiences. Moreover, Creswell & Plano Clark (2017) argue that mixed methods designs can incorporate phenomenological approaches to explore the depth of the research questions, allowing for a more complete understanding of the phenomena in question.

In this phase of the proposed study, the researcher will employ semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection. This approach strikes a balance between structure and flexibility, fostering a more natural and conversational interaction

between the researcher and participants (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The method's guided inquiry aspect allows for a deeper exploration of topics based on participant responses, uncovering challenges, strategies, and contextual factors that might not be captured through a quantitative survey. All interviews will be conducted via Zoom, ensuring schedule flexibility and accessibility for participants. The interviews, approximately 60 minutes in length, will be recorded and transcribed using REV www.rev.com, a professional transcription service.

Once the surveys are completed, the researcher will reach out to the participants and ask if they would like to contribute to the study through an interview. If the participant is not interested, the researcher will express appreciation for their time. At the start of the interview, the researcher will provide an introduction and more information about the study and ask the participant to select a pseudonym for writing purposes. The researcher will also remind the participants of their rights and the voluntary nature of participation. Once the participant decides on a pseudonym, the researcher will inform them that the audio and video recording will commence, ensuring that the participant is comfortable and fully understands the process. The interview questions are designed to explore special education teachers and school psychologists' lived experiences and perspectives regarding incorporating student SES into middle to high school transition planning for students with disabilities. Sample interview questions are: *(a) Can you describe any professional development or training focused on incorporating student SES or other sociocultural factors into transition planning? (b) Have you had to adjust or adapt your approach to SES based on specific challenges you have encountered during*

transition planning? and (c) In your opinion, does more experience or additional training significantly affect how student SES is integrated into transition planning? If the researcher believes the participant can do deeper with their answer, they will probe. On the other hand, the researcher will embrace possible silences or gaps in communication to account for various thinking processes. At the end of the interview, participants will be asked for any additional information they would like to add to the study.

Analytic Plan

After completing the qualitative data collection, the researcher will conduct a Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA). RTA identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns or themes within data while acknowledging the researcher's active role and subjectivity throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024; Byrne, 2022). This flexible approach allows for an interpretive exploration of complex qualitative data. The researcher will follow Campbell et al.'s (2021) adaptation of Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis phases. The first phase, *familiarization with the data,* involves reading through the data, searching for patterns, and gaining a general understanding of the content. In the second phase, *initial code generation,* the researcher will create codes to organize the data. This process includes determining the underlying meaning of each code and exploring how these codes are related or connected. Campbell et al. (2021) describe this phase's action as "labeling and organizing data items into meaningful groups" (p.214). Next, in the *generating themes* phase, the researcher will group codes into preliminary themes by organizing similar codes into broader categories (Campbell et al., 2021). In the subsequent phase, *refining, defining, and naming themes,* the researcher

will clarify each theme's meaning and ensure that the theme aligns with the overall dataset to address the research questions. Finally, the researcher will write a clear and engaging summary of the data's narrative, presenting insights within individual and across themes (Campbell et al., 2021; Braun & Clark, 2020). The qualitative results should inform schools and graduate programs about how preparation variables assist school psychologists and special education teachers in incorporating student SES considerations and what can be done to better support these professionals in helping students with disabilities transition from middle to high school.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

According to Creswell & Plano Clark (2017), "integration in the convergent design intends to develop results and interpretations that expand understanding, are comprehensive, and are validated and confirmed" (p.221). The researcher will achieve successful internal integration by comparing data sets, identifying similarities, and resolving discrepancies between the results. This process enhances the overall value of the mixed-methods approach.

Strengths and Limitations of Convergent Design

The convergent design offers several strengths, such as its efficiency, as data can be collected around the same time. It is also a natural choice for researchers who are new to mixed-methods research and want to gain experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Additionally, Creswell & Plano Clark (2017) state that "the design facilitates the direct comparison of participants' perspectives gathered in an open-ended questioning format with the perspectives drawn from the researcher's standpoint in close-ended questioning.

(p.72). Despite its strengths, the design presents a limitation, the challenge of merging two different types of data (e.g., numerical and textual). To address this, the researcher will create parallel research questions that cover the same concepts across both data types.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are an integral component of any research project, ensuring that all participants' rights, dignity, and well-being are respected. Adhering to ethical guidelines enhances the research's quality and credibility and safeguards both the researcher and participants from harm. Ethical considerations will be thoroughly examined and addressed at every study stage. Ethical approval from the University of California, Riverside Institutional Review Board (IRB) will be obtained before the commencement of data collection. The proposed study will follow the guidelines set out by UCR's IRB, starting with completing the application and providing information about the study (e.g., methodology, significance, participants, and procedures). The researcher will also provide information about the protection of participants and minimize any potential harm. Participants will be compensated for their involvement in the research.

Informed Consent. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. Participants will be provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, any potential risks, and the voluntary nature of their participation. They will also be informed that they can withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. Written consent will be secured to ensure clear understanding and agreement.

Protection of Participants. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, all participant data will be anonymized, and unique identifiers chosen by the participant will be used in place of personal information. Data will be securely stored in the researcher's university Google drive, that is password protected and has multi-factor authentication, which can only be accessed by the researcher. The final report or any subsequent publications will not reveal participants' identities.

Compensation. Participants in this study will receive compensation for their involvement. Those who complete the quantitative portion will receive a $10 gift card. Additionally, participants who complete the interview will have their names entered into a raffle for a chance to win a $75 gift card. A total of 4 gift cards will be raffled. To fund these incentives, the researcher will apply for the UCR Dissertation Research Grant (DRG), which offers up to $2,000, and the UCR School Psychology Dissertation Research Award, which offers up to $400 for expenses related to dissertation research. The researcher will also seek funding through the Graduate Student Research Grants (GSRG) Program from the NASP Research Committee. The GSRG program awards up to $1,000 to support student research that advances the goals of NASP and the field of school psychology.

Minimizing Potential Harm. The proposed study is designed to minimize any potential harm to participants. The sensitivity of the questions will be carefully considered, and participants will be reminded of their right to skip any question or

withdraw from the study if they feel uncomfortable. In addition, debriefing sessions will ensure that participants can ask questions and express concerns after the data collection.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role in this proposed study is not just fluid, but also deeply committed. This commitment is evident as the study transitions between the quantitative and qualitative phases. For the quantitative phase, the researcher will create and administer the survey, recruit the participants, and conduct statistical analysis to derive insights from predetermined statistical significance thresholds. In the qualitative phase, the researcher will attempt to access the participants' lived experiences and perceptions, drawing on her own lived experiences and positionality towards the topic.

Positionality of the Researcher

The researcher is a Black woman who grew up low-income and attended K-12 schools identified as Title 1. The researcher was exposed to the relevance of SES in every aspect of education and how it informed the opportunities, resources, and educational outcomes available and accessible to students. The experience of moving through educational spaces as a Black woman from low income has influenced her outlook and interest in the study. This positionality will inherently and fundamentally inform the positionality of her approach to the research's quantitative and qualitative phases. In the quantitative phase, the researcher is conscious that her lived experiences may influence the survey's design and how she interprets statistical outcomes. While she seeks to maintain objectivity, understanding the contextual complexities of SES will inform her

decisions regarding variables and the statistical significance threshold. Lastly, during the qualitative phase of the research, the researcher's positionality has an even more significant impact. Her lived experience as a Black woman with a low SES background, which is common with many K-12 students, provides empathy and understanding. However, she is also aware of the need to bracket her own experiences, so they do not overshadow the participants' or distort their lived experiences. To be reflective during the research, the researcher intends to utilize analytic memos and research diaries to examine assumptions, biases, and experiences, to be consistent about considerations in her influence of approaches and interactions with participants, the questions she is asking participants, and how she interprets their narratives.

The researcher's lived experiences provide a deep connection to the study, offering insights that other researchers with similar backgrounds may not have. While this adds value to her work, she is acutely aware of the potential for bias. This awareness and her proactive stance in maintaining reflexivity and transparency throughout her study ensures the integrity of her research and instills confidence in her audience about the objectivity of her work.

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