Educational Experiences that Lead to Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities and Complex Needs

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Alison A. Gauld entitled "Educational Experiences that Lead to Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities and Complex Needs." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Educational Leadership.

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
Educational Experiences that Lead to Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities and Complex Needs

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Degree
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Alison Amy Gauld
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ABSTRACT

This study researched Tennessee self-contained teacher perceptions of educational experiences that lead to students’ applying to Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSIDs). This quantitative study utilized a survey, completed anonymously by Tennessee self-contained high school teachers to investigate what self-contained teachers do and what educational experiences lead a student to apply to a TPSID. A chi-square test of independence resulted in one significant result; students are more likely to apply to a TPSID if they participated in non-academic school events and/or activities. There was no significant result for any of the nine events or activities included in the study. The result of this study can inform policy, district staffing, school scheduling, and IEP team planning to ensure students participate in non-academic school events.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Public school instruction for students with complex needs has been an issue debated for decades. Prior to the 1975 landmark legislation, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), students with complex needs were rarely enrolled in the local public school (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017). This legislation, P.L. 94-142, guaranteed students with disabilities a right to an education in grades kindergarten through twelve (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Instruction focused on life or functional skills as students transitioned from institutional settings to public schools (Soukup et al., 2007). Students with complex needs were taught skills such as laundry, setting the table, simple cooking, answering yes/no questions, and matching objects to pictures. The focus was the practice of isolated skills, intended to be transferable within the home or adult residential service settings (Downing, 2005; Katims, 2001).

The regulations in P.L. 94-142 (P.L. 94-142, 1975) have been revised and reauthorized four times, resulting in the most recently authorized version in 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Each iteration added regulations to increase and clarify expectations that students with disabilities be provided instruction including the extension to students aged 3-5, transition planning mandates, access to general education, and emphasis that all students are taught the same standards (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017). The Americans with

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1 “Students with complex needs” as used in the article, refers to students with significant cognitive disabilities and/or with multiple disabilities, and/or are significantly impacted by a disability (i.e. autism, Down syndrome) resulting in needs similar to students with a cognitive disability. This group of students comprises approximately one percent of the population.
Disabilities Act (ADA), signed into law in 1990 (United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, n.d.), was enacted to ensure individuals with disabilities had equitable access to their community, employment, and services. In support of the IDEA regulation for students with disabilities to be taught with their non-disabled peers (2004), the Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA, (2015) added a statewide cap of students with complex needs participating in the alternate assessment to one percent. The ESSA (2015) cap is one measure to ensure students are provided access to standards-based instruction as required in IDEA (U. S, Department of Education, 2022).

In response to the IDEA (2004) and the ESSA (2015) alternate assessment cap, many educators and families expressed opposing viewpoints. These opposing views are most evident in an examination of the individualized education plan (IEP) developed for each student with complex needs. While some students have an IEP that supports inclusionary standards-aligned classroom instruction, this is not universal. “IEPs often describe alternative curriculum focused solely on life skills outcomes” (Soukup et al. 2007 p. 103). IDEA requires IEP teams to develop measurable annual goals aligned to state standards and the student’s postsecondary goals, and yet, the value of academic instruction for students with cognitive disabilities continues to be debated (Ayers et al., 2011; Ayers et al., 2012; Courtade et al., 2012).

Central to the debate is an examination of the student’s experiences while enrolled in school. However, few studies focus on the impact of educational experiences relative to students’
postsecondary outcomes (Blustein et al., 2016; Grigal et al., 2019). Postsecondary engagement measures include enrollment in college, technical school, career training program, employment, or employment readiness training. To increase access to postsecondary education for students with complex needs, the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programming, funded Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID). A TPSID program is an inclusionary program for individuals with an intellectual and/or developmental disability who would not otherwise be admitted to college. The program must be designed in a manner that the students are engaged in inclusionary experiences with traditional college students who do not have a disability, for no less than half of their program. Residency, course options, lengths of program, and other features of the TPSID programs vary across the institutions, however, all, as required, focus on inclusionary learning that leads to employment after exiting from the program. Participation in postsecondary education is a pathway to employment but there is minimal research on how teachers prepare students for successful participation in a TPSID program. My study examined educational experiences of high school students with complex needs in Tennessee schools that led to their interest in applying for an inclusive higher education program, thus adding to the limited body of research. Increasing our knowledge of student experiences that lead to postsecondary engagement is the first step in closing the employment gap between individuals with and without disabilities.

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2 “Engagement” as used in this article includes the measures of IDEA annual performance measure indicator 14, engagement in postsecondary education, training program, or employment. (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(B)).
Securing employment is necessary for adult fiscal independence. Employment is also essential to the individual’s feeling of contribution, perception of self-worth, and opportunity for social relationship development (Modini et al., 2016). Tennessee state standards are systematically designed to align with the skills needed for employment, including preparation for college, technical schools, apprenticeships, or other training programs (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.a).

IDEA requires the IEP to include a transition plan that will lead to postsecondary outcomes (IDEA, 2004). The transition plan should include a course of study, measurable postsecondary employment and education/training goals, and lead to postsecondary readiness and outcomes. (IDEA, 2004). States may exceed this expectation by requiring additional plan components and/or earlier planning. In Tennessee, the State Board of Education §0520-01-09-.12 (2023), requires an “Age-appropriate transition assessments to include, at a minimum, education, training, and employment for students age fourteen (14) and older” (Tennessee State Board of Education, Rule 0520-01-09, 2023). Therefore, the majority of transition plan implementation occurs within the high school years, facilitated by the high school special education teacher or case manager. In Tennessee, the educator preparation policy (Tennessee State Board of Education, Policy 5.105, 2023) distinguishes between special educators who provide services to students with low-incidence disabilities, like a cognitive disability, and those with high-incidence, such as a special learning disability. The licensure endorsement for special education teachers with expertise in cognitive disabilities is named the comprehensive special education license.

Despite the legal requirements for IEP alignment to postsecondary goals, there is minimal research on the link between the student’s educational access to standards-aligned classroom
instruction and postsecondary success (Ruppar et. al., 2016). Therefore, there is limited research to guide Tennessee schools in instructional programming for students with complex needs that will increase the likelihood of postsecondary success.

Statement of the Problem

Ayres et al. (2011) advocate for life or functional skills as the primary instructional focus for students with complex needs to ensure students are directly taught consumer, community, domestic, and self-help skills. These authors posit the need for a primary focus on life or functional skills, contesting the relevance of standards-aligned instruction and appropriateness of the content. In contrast, Courtade et al. (2012) contends the need for inclusionary, standards-based instruction. Central to their argument is the student’s right to an education commensurate with their peers without disabilities. Courtade et al. (2012) argue that standards-aligned classroom instruction is a civil right, relevant, unlimited in depth and breadth, and naturally engaging for students. Furthermore, they argue that functional and life skills can be authentically taught within the standards-aligned classroom instruction, thus adding to the depth and breadth of the student’s learning.

Access to standards-aligned classroom instruction is defined by the opportunity for engagement in complex conceptual learning. IEP teams must consider the student’s least restrictive environment (LRE) when making educational placement decisions (IDEA, 2004). Placement options can range from the general education classroom to a highly restrictive
separate school setting (self-contained\textsuperscript{3}), with one of the most significant differences being the extent to which a student is exposed to learning with their peers and taught by content experts. Kleinert et al. (2015) found that students with significant cognitive disabilities were more likely to be placed in restrictive educational settings and, thus, excluded from general education access. Furthermore, students “who had the least communicative competence, students who used augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and students with the fewest academic skills in reading and mathematics were, most likely to be served in separate settings” (Kleinert et al., 2015, p. 322). While the studies did not provide information related to the instruction provided within a special education setting, Ruppar et al. (2015) found the teacher’s “beliefs about students, teaching, and learning; expectations; and self-efficacy” (p. 222) were the key factors in the decision-making, thus, teachers with high levels of self-efficacy and high expectations are likely to have students with high levels of performance regardless of their ability level. Yet, the findings from the later study by Ruppar et al. (2016) indicate that special education teachers report low levels of self-efficacy in teaching to state standards and long-term, postsecondary transition planning. Given that students with complex needs educational placement is primarily in special education, (Brock, 2018), the Ruppar et. al. (2015) and Rupper et. al. (2016) findings raise concerns regarding the standards-based instruction in special education settings. However, additional research would be needed to determine if low efficacy in

\textsuperscript{3} In Tennessee, self-contained, or restrictive special education settings, are commonly referred to as comprehensive development classrooms (CDC). See Definitions section for more information on self-contained classrooms/settings.
standards-aligned classroom instruction impacts the student’s application to a TPSID or other postsecondary education options that lead to employment success.

One result of the limited access to standards-aligned classroom instruction is that most students with complex needs do not earn a regular diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The lack of a diploma significantly limits postsecondary engagement, however, TPSID programs are designed to minimize the impact. Admission requirements for TPSID programs, while customized by the educational institution, universally do not include a high school diploma (Institute for Community Inclusion, 2023). In Tennessee, the first TPSID was founded in 2010 at Vanderbilt University (Vanderbilt University, Peabody College, 2023). Today there are eight TPSID programs in Tennessee, seven at universities and one at a community college (Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, 2022).

Postsecondary education is one of the key experiences that lead to employment for students with complex needs (Petcu et al., 2015). “Undoubtedly, attending college can increase the likelihood of securing competitive, integrated employment.” (Qian et al., 2018 p. 337). A review of the research by Lee and Taylor (2022) found that students who participate in a TPSID program have higher rates of employment and soft skills including social relationships, behavior, independence, and health.

Despite the research supporting participation in a TPSID (Moore & Schelling, 2015), students with complex needs in Tennessee have low rates of postsecondary engagement relative to students in other IDEA disability classifications (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.b). IDEA (2004) requires state education agencies to report the postsecondary engagement rates of students with disabilities one year following their exit from the school system. Tennessee collects the data by surveying one-fourth of local school systems, rotated on a four-year cycle,
and annually the four large metropolitan districts. In the Tennessee 2013-14 survey, 80% of students with an intellectual disability reported no postsecondary engagement (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.b) which is four times the non-engagement rates of students with a specific learning disability (20%) and twice the rates of students with emotional disturbance (41%). Thus, students with an intellectual disability are the most vulnerable of these three disability groups.

Policy (Tennessee State Board of Education, Rule 0520-01-09, 2023; Tennessee State Board of Education, Policy 5.105, 2023) and research (Downing, 2005; Soukup et al., 2007) support the inclusion of students with complex needs in standards-aligned classroom instruction as a strategy for increasing postsecondary success. Inclusionary practices are a way to secure the student’s civil rights while encouraging the natural inquisitiveness of students and youth. (Courtade et al., 2012). Furthermore, IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) require access to standards-aligned classroom instruction to support the student in achieving their individualized postsecondary education and employment goals. (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; IDEA, 2004). However, while there are multiple reasons for the provision of standards-aligned classroom instruction for all students, the relationship between the engagement of students with complex needs in standards-based instruction and increased postsecondary outcomes remains inconclusive.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the educational experiences that lead students with complex needs to apply for admission to TPSID. Completion of the TPSID program is one of the key experiences that leads to higher employment rates for individuals with a significant
cognitive disability or complex needs, yet few students with cognitive disabilities enroll (Smith et al., 2018).

**Research Questions**

This study sought to answer two research questions:

1. What does a self-contained (CDC) teacher do that leads to students applying for inclusive higher education programs?

2. What do self-contained (CDC) teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not?

**Significance of the Study**

Students with complex needs are a heterogeneous group with a wide range of abilities, medical needs, communication skills, and disabilities, but are also a small proportion of the general population, thus it is difficult to recruit a large number of participants for a quantitative study. Given the challenges of recruitment, quantitative research reviewed was primarily a study of current data sets (Carter et al., 2012; Lee & Taylor, 2022; Modini et al., 2016; Moore & Schelling, 2015; Smith et al., 2018; Spooner and Browder, 2015;). The review of a current database is limited to static descriptive statistics and does not include the effect of variables such as the educational experiences of the student. Therefore, the results of studies based on a data set may be limited in their generalizability or identification of strategies that increase postsecondary outcomes. Another research design used to honor the diverse and specialized needs of students with complex needs is case studies. Case studies participants are students or of the adults who lead the programs for the students (Kleinert et al., 2015; Prohn et al., 2018). The limitations of these studies include difficulty with generalization across the range of students with the low-incidence population. (Domin et al., 2020; Kleinert et al., 2015; Moore & Schelling, 2015;
Prohn, et al., 2018). I searched for a quantitative study to support or refute the case studies findings, but was unable to locate one. In addition, Ruppar et al. (2016), were unable to find studies linking high school experiences to postsecondary engagement. Therefore, there is a need for research that is both generalizable to the larger population of students with complex needs than is possible within a case study but also adds to the knowledge by examining the relationship between high school and postsecondary options, such as TPSID programs. This study was a quantitative survey of current practices within high schools as predictors of students’ choice to apply for the postsecondary TPSID program. The study will add to the body of literature and provide an opportunity for future research that will build on the results from public school education, postsecondary education, and employment of individuals with complex needs.

Morningstar et. al. (2017) concluded a “need for further research to develop and evaluate specific alternate achievement goals aligned to CCR [career and college readiness] standards for students with severe disabilities” (p. 200). School standards, accountability, and expectations are carefully crafted to ensure students graduate high school prepared for success in college, and ultimately, in a chosen career field. The success of these systems is clear for students without disabilities (Ayers et al., 2012). However, the postsecondary success for students with complex needs is persistently low. Less than 30% of students with an intellectual disability are engaged in any school, training program, or work according to internal annual student surveys conducted by the Tennessee Department of Education (2015). This study will identify self-contained teacher-reported educational experiences of students who applied for a TPSID. Thus, this study can identify ways to increase postsecondary engagement for students with complex needs and decrease non-engagement, underemployment, and unemployment. While unemployment impacts
the quality of an individual’s life including their social, economic, and mental health (Modini et al., 2016), the effects of unemployment extend beyond the individual to society.

The study results will inform the stakeholders critical to the education of students with complex needs and their postsecondary success. The results of this study will also inform parents who are members of the IEP team and would benefit from research on the educational experiences that are associated with increased application to a TPSID program. The results of the study will also inform school leaders and teachers who are key decision-makers for the students. For example, school leadership creates a master schedule and allocates adults and resources to meet the needs of the students and teachers curate instructional resources and educational experiences for their students. This study will provide school leaders and educators with information for making decisions such as allocating staff, planning instruction, or planning school events to increase students with complex needs applications to TPSID programs.

Although not members of the IEP team, this study will also be informative for policymakers who make decisions about fiscal allocations, high school graduation requirements, and instructional rules. The study will provide additional data to assist them with the complicated task of creating policies that achieve the desired results.

Finally, this study will add to the body of research on students with disabilities and their educational outcomes. The results of this study could contribute to the collective understanding of how educational experiences impact postsecondary and career outcomes for students with complex needs. Examining the relationship between standards-aligned classroom instruction and postsecondary outcomes will help link the current research on instructional pedagogy to federal requirements (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; IDEA, 2004), and postsecondary education.
Identifying the educational opportunities critical to postsecondary success will drive school systemic change necessary to alleviate the negative impacts of an underemployed workforce.

**Definition of Terms**

To support the reader, the following terms are defined as they are used in this study.

**Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)** – AAC is an umbrella term for technology, picture symbols, eye gaze boards, or other communications systems that are used to provide a mode other than verbal or sign for an individual.

**Engagement** – IDEA annual performance measure indicator 14 defines engagement as participation in one of the following: postsecondary education (college, community college, vocational trade school), an employment training program, or employment. (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(B)).

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP)** – The IEP is a federally mandated document and plan to support students with disabilities in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

**Postsecondary success** – In this study, postsecondary success is used to describe individuals who have graduated or aged out of the public school system and are currently in a postsecondary education or training program or who are employed.

**Self-contained or self-contained classrooms** – Self-contained classrooms are special education settings that provide highly modified instruction and specialized intervention and strategies. The students taught in these classrooms are all students with disabilities. In Tennessee, these classrooms are commonly referred to as Comprehensive Development Classrooms or CDC. Because the participants are Tennessee teachers, CDC will be used in the survey and referenced throughout the study within paratheses next to the term self-contained.
**Self-contained teacher** – The special education teacher who provides the instruction within a self-contained setting. These teachers are typically also the case manager for the students with cognitive disabilities in the school, even if the student’s least restrictive environment is within the general education setting for a portion of the day. A case manager is responsible for the IEP paperwork and implementation.

**Students with complex needs** – In this study, students with complex needs includes students with significant cognitive disabilities and/or with multiple disabilities, and/or are significantly impacted by a disability (i.e. autism, Down syndrome) resulting in needs similar to students with complex needs. This group of students comprises approximately one percent of the population.

**Delimitations**

This study was designed with several delimitations. First, the population included high school teachers of students with complex needs. TPSID programs are specifically designed to support the students for this population of teachers, thus, they were the target population. Inclusionary practices and differences across districts in the allocation and assignments of educators may lead to the participation of special education teachers who work with students with high-incidence disabilities as well as students with complex needs. High-incidence disabilities are those disabilities that occur most frequently including students with a specific learning disability, speech and/or language disability, and other health impairments (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). The first survey question was designed to mitigate this impact and ensure the teachers who responded primarily support students with complex needs.

It can be argued that all teachers in grades kindergarten through high school impact a students’ postsecondary engagement decisions. However, this study focused exclusively on high
school self-contained (CDC) teachers because they are involved directly in the students’ transition from high school to adulthood for all students on their caseload.

The research questions are focused on self-contained (CDC) teacher perceptions and therefore, school leaders and general education teachers are not included within the population. Also, only self-contained (CDC) teachers in Tennessee will be included. The federal definitions and guidelines of IDEA (2004) must be met by all states, but many states have added additional protections, eligibility requirements, or disability considerations. Thus, the definition of eligibility categories like “intellectually disabled” varies slightly from state to state. Focusing on a single state will eliminate the potential for results based on state definition differences rather than educational experiences. Tennessee has more TPSID programs than most states and, as a result, more students have an opportunity to apply to a local state school, so it was selected as the focus state.

Also, the study was a survey designed to allow for a statewide examination of educational experiences and postsecondary engagement. The data provided a landscape of the educational experiences in Tennessee. This study did not seek to inquire why teachers are making their instructional decisions or examine their beliefs about the value of TPSID programs. Rather, this study was to add to the field a data set that examines educational experiences to link the experiences of high school to postsecondary engagement. Given that there is minimal, if any research specific to this population to answer this question (Ruppar et al., 2016) this study was designed to capture a wide range of educational experiences a self-contained (CDC) teachers perceived to be significant.

Parent and student influence on participation in TPSID programs is not being measured within this study. While a parent may be able to answer some of the survey questions about their
student’s experience, the research question is about what the self-contained teachers do that lead to students applying for a TPSID. Surveying parents and students was outside the scope of the study.

**Organization of the Study**

Postsecondary engagement is important to increasing employment outcomes for students with complex needs. The IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) mandate that educational experiences and instruction be developed to lead to postsecondary education and employment. TPSID programs are one of the pathways for students with complex needs that result in increasing employment. Little is known about what high school educational experiences lead students to apply for admission to a TPSID program. Thus, schools and families are not able to make evidence-based decisions when developing an IEP that should lead to postsecondary success. This study sought to examine these experiences. Chapter two will provide a review of current literature that guided the study design as described in chapter three. Chapter four is a report of the study results and chapter five is a discussion of the results.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study will address two research questions: What does a self-contained (CDC) teacher do that leads to students applying for inclusive higher education programs? What do teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not? An examination of the historical and legal contexts and current outcome data will highlight the need for improved transition practices. Additionally, a review of research on instructional practices and employment outcomes will emphasize a need for research on the educational experiences that lead to increased postsecondary engagement.

Historical context

Historically, individuals with disabilities have been segregated in special schools or institutions (long-term, residential facilities) (Scanlon, n.d.). Community and public schools were established in the late 1700s and early 1800s but students with disabilities were not allowed to attend (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017). A few schools for students with disabilities were started although they were typically residential, and primarily for students who were blind. The first school for the “feeble-minded” was established by Samuel Gridley Howe in 1848 and housed on a wing at the Perkins School for the Blind (Smith, 2003). “Dr. Howe soon found that the blind, always a peculiarly sensitive class, deeply resented the presence of the idiots under the same roof with themselves. They feared that they may be confounded with these weaker brethren” (Elliot & Hall, 1903, p. 231). As a result, students with intellectual disabilities were removed and segregated on separate campuses for many years.

Although students with complex needs were segregated, instructional practices did continue to progress. French educator and physician, Edouard Seguin’s 1844 book, Traitement Moral, Hygiene, et, Education des Idiots revolutionized the education and treatment of youth
with cognitive disabilities (Constant, 2014). In his book, Seguin uses observations and other data to conclude that individuals with a cognitive disability can learn when instruction is systematic and targeted. As a result of Seguin’s work, advocates sought to change the education for students with complex needs (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017).

Despite the work of Howe and Seguin to increase the efficacy of instructional practices for youth with complex needs, the public school options for students with disabilities in the United States continued to be segregated. The Brown v. Board of Education (1954) ruling found that separate is not equal. Despite this ruling, educational practices for students with disabilities did not change, and segregation continued.

The historical approach of separate and different education for students with cognitive disabilities was one of the driving forces behind The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, PL 94-142, ratified in 1975. PL 94-142 was created because “more than half of the handicapped children in the United States do not receive appropriate educational services which would enable them to have full equality of opportunity.” (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Congress would reauthorize the law four additional times, changing the name during the second reauthorization in 1990 to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA) (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2023).

**Current laws, regulations, and postsecondary outcomes**

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA requires individualized educational plan (IEP) teams to develop transition goals for students by age 16 to include employment and postsecondary education and training aligned to the student’s employment goal(s). Also, IDEA requires equity of access to instruction with non-disabled peers including career and technical education (CTE) (IDEA, 2004). Furthermore, the focus on postsecondary outcomes aligns with the current
reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), titled Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). It has been nineteen years since the last reauthorization of IDEA (2004) and eight since ESSA (2015). During this time, data have been collected and reported to the United States Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) to measure progress toward the goals of the legislation.

Per IDEA (2004), state education agencies must submit an annual progress report on seventeen indicators. Indicator 14 is a measure of student employment and training engagement one year after exiting the public school system. “Exit” is an encompassing term referring to students who earned a regular diploma, exceed the age of eligibility for IDEA services as defined as through age 21 or longer as determined by the state of residence, and students who chose to leave the public school system by choice prior to exceeding the age of eligibility or earning a regular diploma (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022). Despite this focus, mandated transition planning within the IEP has not sufficiently increased employment in Tennessee.

In 2015, one-fourth of Tennessee school districts and all four large metropolitan districts were asked to survey students who exited their district in 2013-14. Survey results indicated that 80% of students with an intellectual disability reported no postsecondary engagement (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015). Postsecondary engagement measures include enrollment in a college (traditional or TPSID program), technical school, career training program, employment, or employment readiness training. For reference, this same report indicates non-engagement rates for students with a specific learning disability or emotional disturbance were 20% and 41% respectively. Engagement data reports that 80% of students with a specific learning disability and 59% of students with an emotional disturbance were engaged, at various levels, in education or employment. At a rate of only 20% engagement, students with an intellectual disability are one-
third as likely to be engaged in education or employment as students with an emotional disturbance and only one-fourth as likely as students with a specific learning disability.

This disparity extends to employment rates of individuals aged 16-65. According to the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, (2022), the 2019 national employment rate for people with a cognitive disability was 30%, and a lower rate in Tennessee of 26%. In contrast, the employment rate of people with a disability, inclusive of all disabilities, is 38% nationally and 35% in Tennessee. The disparity becomes increasingly concerning when compared to the employment rates of 76% for individuals with no disability nationally and in Tennessee. In summary, a person with an intellectual disability is only one-third as likely to be employed as a person with no disability.

Securing employment is critical for adult fiscal independence. Employment is also essential to the individual’s feeling of contribution, perceived self-worth, and opportunity for social relationship development (Modini et al., 2016). However, meaningful, full-time employment at minimum or a higher wage remains an obstacle for most individuals with a significant cognitive disability or complex needs. Central to identifying key levers for employment is an examination of the educational experiences that prepared the student for the transition to employment.

**Preparation programs**

The low employment rates of individuals with cognitive disabilities inspired researchers to identify predictors of employment. The National Longitudinal Transition Study–2 (NLTS-2) data were analyzed by Carter et al. (2012) to identify predictors of postsecondary employment for students with significant cognitive disabilities. They identified several factors including paid work experience, communication skills, independence skills, and parent or family expectations.
Enrollment in pre-vocational or vocational classes was not a predictor, however, the specifics of these courses as aligned to the student’s career interests was not available in the data set as presented in this study.

Molina & Demchak (2016) researched the effects of a one-week summer camp designed to teach employment readiness skills (soft skills such as punctuality, asking for help, politeness, interviewing, etc.) that included a day working as a volunteer in community businesses. With the support of job coaches, special education teacher facilitators, and family engagement, the students increased their postsecondary employment within their rural community. While the camp did employ special education teachers, it was independent of the school system and developed for the purposes of the research study. However, similar findings resulted from a study using vocational rehabilitation data which found increased employment for clients who received supported employment supports (Wehman et al., 2014). Employment rates increased when individuals with complex needs were provided targeted support and training specific to employment.

Smith et al. (2018) studied the impacts of student participation in postsecondary education using the 2014 vocational rehabilitation client data. Vocational rehabilitation is a disability service provider focused on employment outcomes. Clients aged 16-26 who exited the vocational rehabilitation program had an employment rate of 55% with an average weekly salary of $200. For clients who also participated in postsecondary employment, the employment rate rose to 60.7% and the average weekly salary increased by 44% to $288. The employment rate and weekly salary increased significantly to 63.7% and $302 respectively when the client made academic progress in their postsecondary education program. This is a significant finding given
that Tennessee’s 2019 employment rate of individuals with cognitive disabilities was reported at 26% (Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, 2022).

The benefits of participation in a TPSID are supported by research. Wehman et al. (2018) identified four pathways to competitive integrated employment meaning, full or part-time work with peers who do not have disabilities, earning a similar wage, benefits, and opportunities for advancement. Of the four pathways identified, three were work experiences and one was participation in a postsecondary education program such as a TPSID. Increased employment outcomes are well documented across findings and studies (Domin et al., 2020, Lee & Taylor, 2022; Moore & Schelling, 2015). A study of data in the TPSID National Coordinating Center analyzed employment outcomes of graduates based on features of their TPSID program. (Qian et al., 2018) Higher employment rates were associated with participation in only inclusive classes, paid work experience, inclusive social experiences on their college campus, and volunteering or community experience. Furthermore, the students become increasingly independent (Prohn et al 2018), a factor identified as a predictor of employment by Carter et al. (2012).

The Institute for Community Inclusion TPSID technical assistance center, Think College, reported a 2021-22 employment rate of 73% for students one year after graduating from their TPSID (n.d.). This is a remarkable statistic at a rate of three times more likely to be employed than the 2019 employment rates of individuals with cognitive needs in Tennessee at 26% (Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, 2022). Furthermore, the employment rate of 73% is commensurate with the 2019 employment rate of 76% for individuals without disabilities. Thus, graduation from a TPSID can lead to equitable employment for individuals with complex needs.
Despite the positive outcomes, few students participate in a TPSID program. Even when vocational rehabilitation is paying for all or a portion of the TPSID program, less than 4% of vocational rehabilitation clients with a cognitive disability enroll (Smith et al., 2018). Increased enrollment in a TPSID can lead to increased employment of individuals with complex needs and reduce the employment gap. High schools are a natural pathway for students to college and understanding the educational experiences that lead to applying to a TPSID can inform practice and policy.

**High school experiences**

High school is an adult preparation program. The instruction and opportunities available to students provide youth and young adults with the skills necessary to obtain a career. A review of the literature reveals a dichotomy of opinions related to teaching students with complex needs. The article by Ayers et al. (2011) advocated for a focus on life skills. They summarized research into consumer skills, other community skills, domestic, and self-help. The focus on skills outside of the state standards is commensurate with the LRE settings of students with complex needs. “In fact, students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are placed in separate classrooms and separate schools at a considerably higher rate than the IDEA categories from which their numbers typically come (intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and autism)” (Kleinert et al., 2015, p. 323).

The belief that life skills, or functional curriculum, should be the focus is contradictory to federal policy requirements and expectations. The IDEA, (2004), requires that an IEP be designed to ensure, among other things that a student is “involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum” (§1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(IV)(bb)). Furthermore, all students are required to participate in state assessments aligned to state standards. Students who “cannot
participate in regular assessments, even with accommodations, as indicated in their respective IEPs” must be provided assessments “aligned with the State’s challenging academic content standards and challenging student academic achievement standards” (§300.160(c)(1); §300.160(c)(2)(i)). ESSA (2015) builds on the IDEA (2004) expectations limiting alternate assessment standards developed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to not exceed one percent of the total population. Alternate assessment standards must be “aligned to ensure that a student who meets the alternate academic achievement standards is on track to pursue postsecondary education or employment.” (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015, §1111(b)(1)(E)(i)(V)). The standards must not be reduced, but rather, the measures of achievement should be modified in accordance with IEP accommodations and modifications. Federal guidance and recommendations clarify that schools may not adopt an alternate curriculum but may provide supplementary materials, preventing student exclusion from access to the instruction available to their non-disabled peers. The federal perspective on the importance of access to instruction is partially driven by the current postsecondary engagement data.

Courtade et al., (2012) reflected the federal expectations and responded in contrast to Ayers et al. (2011) with seven reasons students with complex needs should be engaged in standards-based instruction. One of the foundational beliefs for the Courtade et al., (2012) position is that all “students with severe disabilities should have full access to their schools, communities, and future job opportunities” (p.4). As discussed in the section above, participation in a TPSID increases employment outcomes, and these programs are in colleges.

To deny someone an opportunity that all other members of a society are afforded should require a compelling rationale. We propose in our following points that the rationale to
deny some students the opportunity for full access to the general curriculum is not compelling. (Courtade et al., 2012 pg. 5)

Equitable opportunities to apply for college, whether a traditional or TPSID program, begin in high school.

A study by Morningstar, et al. (2017) surveyed research experts in the field of significant cognitive disabilities to evaluate the experiences and characteristics of college and career readiness as related to students with significant cognitive disabilities. Common Core state standards were reported by experts included in the study as essential to postsecondary success. “Without a doubt, the most commonly identified skills across the six domains were directly associated with those needed to access the general education curriculum and context” (Morningstar, et al., 2017, p. 199). In recent years, many states have shifted from Common Core to state-developed and adopted standards, similar in breadth and depth but personalized to the political and educational climate of the state. Standards are abstract and the teachers are ultimately the instructional decision makers when developing lesson plans. Instruction must be carefully constructed to ensure all students have access regardless of background, strengths, needs, and disability. Yet, special education teachers report low confidence in the implementation of the principles of universal design for learning required to support all learners’ instructional access and participation (Ruppar et al., 2015).

Teachers perceived agency to impact the postsecondary outcomes of students with complex needs also impacts their beliefs about students’ potential to benefit from standards-based instruction. “Teachers articulated differing perspectives on the potential outcomes of their literacy instruction, which were based on their perceptions of their students’ capacities to learn.” (Ruppar et al 2015, p. 220). As a result, some teachers focused on life skills while others focused
on standards, citing reasons similar to those in the Ayers et al. (2011) and Courtade et al. (2012) debate. However, educators may not need to choose between life skills and standards. Instead, they could provide both.

Research has found evidence that integration of functional or life skills curriculum within standards-based instruction is necessary for student success. For example, in the Morningstar et al., (2017) study:

Experts described a range of skills contingent to certain CCR [college and career readiness] domains, such as literacy within academic engagement. Importantly, experts also identified foundational skills, particularly those associated with self-determination and communication access, as well as peer interactions, and, to a lesser extent, prosocial behaviors. (p. 199)

Spooner and Browder (2015) analyzed research findings to identify evidence-based practices for supporting students’ IEP goal areas of daily living, social communication, and academics. Systematic instruction and specific response prompting were identified across the studies they reviewed as the most promising strategies, supporting the potential for students to gain skills in both functional/life skills and standards-aligned learning. This brings us back full circle to the research by Carter et al. (2012) identifying predictors to employment that include life skills such as paid work experience and opportunities within standards-based instruction from high expectations and to support communication skill development.

While the research has identified predictors of employment success for students with complex needs, there remain questions as to how to increase outcomes. Paid employment is a strong predictor (Carter et al., 2012) and postsecondary education, specifically TPSID programs, can reduce the employment gap (Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, 2022). Yet
the question remains, what is the relationship between high school experiences and postsecondary education? Ayers et al. (2012) asked these same questions in their response to Courtade et al. (2012) and they clarified the intentions of the 2011 (Ayers et al.) article. They were not advocating exclusively for life skills but rather, are concerned with the lack of outcomes for students. Educational decisions, they contend, should not be driven by mandates.

There is not even a clear logic model linking educational programs for SWSD [students with severe disabilities] which focus primarily on SBC [standards-based curriculum] with improved access to employment or reduction in reliance on outside service providers after high school. Until that linkage is demonstrated, we cannot definitively say that a SBC should be the primary curriculum for SWSD. (Ayers et al., 2012, p. 15)

In point in fact, the search for a link between the experiences of students with complex needs in schools and their employment outcomes is the drive behind this research study.

**Conclusion**

In summary, research indicates that participation in a TPSID program is a predictor of increased employment for students with complex needs. A review of the literature to examine the educational experiences of students prior to enrolling in postsecondary education or a TPSID reveals dichotomous opinions impacted by the beliefs of educators. The relationship between the educational experiences and the choices of students with complex needs to apply for and enroll in a TPSID remains unclear. (Ayers et al., 2012) Despite efforts to do so, I was unable to find a study that analyzed the link between kindergarten through high school programs and postsecondary education.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the educational experiences that led students with complex needs to apply for admission to a TPSID. There were two research questions guiding the design of the study:

1. What does a self-contained (CDC) teacher do that leads to students applying for inclusive higher education programs?
2. What do teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not?

Participation in a TPSID program is correlated with higher rates of employment for students with cognitive disabilities (Moore & Schelling, 2015; Qian et al., 2018). Increased employment outcomes are essential for students with complex needs, as it is for all adults, to be able to afford to live the life they desire. The National Disability Institute, (Goodman et. al, 2017) reported a saving to the Social Security Administration of over $4 million when individuals with disabilities are employed.

Preparation for employment begins in school, kindergarten through high school years, and a postsecondary transition plan is a requirement for students with disabilities by age 16 (IDEA, 2004). The study examined the educational experiences that lead to students with complex needs applying for a TPSID program. The study will use a survey method to obtain quantitative data aligned with the two research questions. The design and rationale for the study are discussed further below.
**Research Design and Rationale**

A quantitative survey design was used in this study. Students with complex disabilities comprise approximately one percent of the student population (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Because of the small population of students, there is, accordingly, a small number of special education teachers providing instruction and/or intervention to students with complex needs. Using a survey design provides an opportunity for an increased number of participants in the sample and conclusions that can be generalized to the population of Tennessee self-contained (CDC), high-school teachers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

There are eight TPSID programs in Tennessee located across the state from the southwest corner in Memphis (TigerLIFE at the University of Memphis), to the northeast corner in Johnson City (Access ETSU at East Tennessee State University). The use of a survey enables high school self-contained (CDC) teachers throughout Tennessee to participate without concerns about travel or access to electronic video conferencing (Robinson & Leonard, 2019).

Qualitative research is important in the field for increasing an understanding of why and how. However, qualitative research limitations include generalizability, occurrences of events or experiences within the population, and analysis of the statistical likelihood of an occurrence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, quantitative research can add to the body of knowledge where qualitative is limited (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This study examined what actions and educational experiences CDC teachers provide students that lead the student to apply to a TPSID. The question is looking at common practices, across schools, and therefore, a quantitative survey design is aligned with the research questions.
Participants

The participants were high school CDC teachers and were identified through a search of school and district web pages and staff contact information. Once identified, the teachers were sent an email, approved through the internal review board (IRB), outlining the purpose of the study, voluntary consent to participate information, and a link to the survey. Also, the CDC teachers were provided with an email for the researcher should they have any questions or seek information. The contents of the email provided directions for the survey (see Appendix B).

CDC teachers provide services to students with complex needs, a very heterogeneous group. However, as discussed in chapter one, the educational experiences teachers provide for students with complex needs are not as varied and often in exclusionary, special education settings (Kleinert et al., 2015). Meaning, the self-contained (CDC) teacher is providing both content instruction and intervention for students across grades. Also, in accordance with IDEA (2004) and Tennessee Code Annotated §49-10-101 (2022), teachers need to continue to provide students with disabilities services through age 21, or the year in which they turn 22. As a result, the participants will be able to report on high school experiences for students in grades 9-12 and post-fourth year of high school through age 22.

One consideration when using a quantitative survey was the inability to clarify or ask for further information related to the results. However, the research questions are seeking to answer what educational experiences are linked with applying to a TPSID, not why they apply. This difference was critical to the selection of methodology. Any results that lead to further questions will be discussed in the implications for future practice.
Data Collection

Instrumentation

The study used an author created survey (see Appendix A), delivered electronically using Qualtrics software. The survey was face-validated by three self-contained teachers, one from each region of Tennessee to ensure the questions were stated clearly, without bias or leading vocabulary, and aligned to the research questions. The three reviewers agreed the survey was aligned and the small suggestions for language changes were incorporated into the final version. Additionally, the survey, having been created from this study, was validated. To validate the survey, it was sent to the Tennessee special education directors to review and respond to the questions, and I sent them the survey again 2-4 weeks later respond again. After the two survey administrations, the responses were compared through an analysis using a crosstab correlation and it was determined that the responses, across several questions, were statistically the same for both administrations. It should be noted, while these two processes validated the survey, it is not a tested survey. This was the first administration of the survey in a study.

The survey consisted of four parts: respondent demographics, inclusive higher education programs, the high school experience, and postsecondary and transition planning. The participants were informed that participation was voluntary. Participant consent was given by choosing to participate in the survey.

The email to potential participants included directions and a study overview that included a summary of the purpose of the study to focus on educational experiences that lead students with complex needs to apply to an inclusive higher education program. A definition was provided for “students with complex needs” and “inclusive higher education programs.” A brief overview of the survey design and expected length of time was provided. Finally, the overview
included information on the anonymity and confidentiality of the information provided by the participant in accordance with the IRB review and an email to contact me. The email also included a link to the survey. The potential participant was able to choose whether or not to open the survey online and a timestamp was assigned once they submitted their responses. No other respondent data was collected.

There were nine demographic questions, eight closed and one open. The closed questions asked about the respondents' teaching experiences, education level, race/ethnicity, and gender identity. One question asked if the respondent had any experience as a volunteer or paid employee of an inclusive higher education program. The respondents were also asked if they are teaching in one of the counties in which an inclusive higher education program exists: Shelby, Dyer, Madison, Davidson, Knox, Washington, Carter, or Sullivan. This was used in data analysis to determine if there was a difference in answers based on the proximity of the inclusive higher education program. The final question was an open question that allowed the respondents to provide any information they wanted to share before submission.

The inclusive higher education programs section followed participant demographics. There were nine questions, eight were closed questions, and one was an open question. This section focuses on gathering information on the teachers’ familiarity and knowledge of the TPSID programs (three questions), specifically the programs in Tennessee. Then, the questions gather information on how many students, if any, have applied to a TPSID program (one closed question), a multi-response question about who led the application process (teacher, student, family, adult agency, unknown, other), how many students have been accepted (one question), or chose not to attend (two closed questions and one open question). Robinson and Leonard (2019) recommend surveys provide open-response questions to limit potential participant stress or
concern that the question options did not provide sufficient detail or fully align with the participants’ answers. The open response provides the participant a space to add clarification on their responses or information they believe is relevant. While the open-response answers will not be used for analysis, participant responses may provide helpful information for future research.

Next, the survey asked eight closed questions about the high school experiences of the students. Three questions were used to gather data on the teacher’s role. This included the grade level(s) or age ranges taught, the location of the teacher’s service delivery (special education, general education, or both), and the primary responsibilities of the teacher (instruction, intervention, case management). One question asked about the LRE of the students and was framed specifically about only one setting was purposeful to avoid respondent assumptions of expected response or “correctness” of selection (Robinson & Leonard, 2019). A question collected information on what courses students attend if the student’s LRE includes general education for at least one course. A question on student participation in non-academic activities such as school events, dances, and clubs followed. The final two questions in this section link the questions about educational experiences to those answered earlier in the survey on inclusive higher education. These two questions asked the respondent about the LRE and engagement in non-academic activities of students who applied for an inclusive higher education program.

The final section of the survey was three questions. Respondents were asked about how families receive information about postsecondary options and which postsecondary programs families have accessed for their student(s). The final question in this section was an open question asking about what other postsecondary options families have used that were not included in the prior question, thus alleviating potential ambiguity (Robinson & Leonard, 2019).
At the close of the survey, the respondents were provided an opportunity to add any additional information in an open response field. After finishing and closing the survey, they received an auto-response message thanking them and providing my email should they have questions or comments.

Survey Data Collection

An electronic survey using Qualtrics was developed using the wording and option selections illustrated in Appendix A. The survey was sent to self-contained, CDC teachers, identified through an internet search of district and school websites in Tennessee. The initial email included an introduction and a link to the survey. The email also included information on the approximate length of time to complete the survey, the anonymity of the respondents, confidentiality, use of the data, and the final date to participate. (Robinson & Leonard, 2019). As suggested by Robinson and Leonard (2019), an email was sent a few days prior to the survey close to remind potential participants there was still time to participate.

The survey data were collected within the Qualtrics software site. After the survey closed, the data were exported to a secured online site and an external hard drive. The exported data were used for analysis.

Data Analysis

After closing the survey window, the data were downloaded from Qualtrics as an Excel database. The Excel database was stored in a secure Google Drive folder and uploaded to Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Frequency data, meaning how many responses for each option, was calculated to illustrate the respondent’s demographics including teaching experience, special education teaching experience, high school special education teaching experience, educational degree
attainment, gender, race/ethnicity, and any prior experience working or volunteering at an inclusive higher education program. Also, the frequency of respondents that teach in a county that also has an inclusive higher education program versus the frequency of respondents that do not was calculated and used for additional analysis to determine the degree to which a local TPSID is or is not a factor. The frequency of individuals who did not have prior knowledge of inclusive higher education versus the frequency of respondents with any knowledge (three options of the survey) was calculated for reporting.

Data from the high school experiences section was analyzed to address research question one, what does a self-contained (CDC) teachers do that leads to students applying for inclusive higher education programs? First, the responses to the survey question asking if they had any student apply to a TPSID were cross-tabulated, combining the choices of 1-2 current or former students, 3-6 current or former students, and 7 or more current or former students into a single group representing, yes, at least one student has applied. The response, no students, remained a single group. These two groups were then used in a chi-squared test for independence with the responses related to the LRE that the teacher reported they spend most of their day. The cross-tabulated groups of yes students applied and no were analyzed in a chi-square test of independence with the data on the LRE of the students who have applied to a TPSID.

This process was repeated for students who were accepted to a TPSID program. The data from the question on how many current or former students were cross-tabulated, again combining the data from the responses 1-2 current or former students, 3-6, and 7 or more to create a single group, yes at least one student accepted. The response no students remained no students. These two groups were used to calculate a chi-square test of independence with the data on the LRE of the students accepted to a program.
The second research question, what do self-contained (CDC) teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not, was addressed through an analysis of responses related to non-academic participation. The same cross-tabulated groups were used for the chi-square test of independence with the data on participation in nine different school events. The relationship between LRE and participation in non-academic events was also analyzed using a chi-square test of independence.

Frequency data were calculated to illustrate the postsecondary options available within the community and postsecondary options students applied to other than a TPSID program. This analysis will be used to determine if TPSID programs are the only option for students with complex needs or if there are a wide range of postsecondary choices. The analysis from this frequency data will inform the discussion of the results.

The results of the analysis were summarized with charts, tables, and graphs. (See Chapter 4 and Appendix E for results.) Probability values were reported, and significance was highlighted for reader clarity (Robinson & Leonard, 2019).

**Ethical Safeguards**

Ethical treatment of the participants is essential. The invitation to voluntarily participate, survey directions, survey design, and internal review board approval process was a multi-faceted approach to ensure the ethical treatment of each participant. The email invite was the first interaction with the participant. The email clearly articulated three key principles: the anonymity of their response, voluntary participation, and researcher contact information. The participants had the agency to choose to participate and were able to skip any question. Furthermore, the survey software, Qualtrics, labeled each response with only a time and date stamp. No email, name, or identifiable information was collected.
The survey design was carefully constructed to include contextual statements to alleviate stress or fear of judgment (Robinson & Leonard, 2019). For example, “Postsecondary options vary by the area in which the student lives” preceded a question asking what postsecondary options students have accessed. The context reduces the perception that I am seeking a particular response. Also, the closed-question answer options were balanced and most often an even number, preventing the appearance of an average response (Robinson & Leonard, 2019). The design was streamlined to collect only the data needed to answer the research questions, thus reducing respondent fatigue (Robinson & Leonard, 2019). Also, because the data were used for quantitative analysis and no follow-up questions were asked, no identifiable information was collected.

Following the ethical research standards and university policy, the research design including the survey directions, timeline, and survey was approved through the internal review board (IRB) process. The IRB process is a critical safeguard for participant safety and ethical treatment. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Combined, the invitation email, survey directions, survey design, voluntary participation, and IRB approval were designed for the ethical treatment of the respondents.

**Role of the Researcher**

I was a special education teacher for 21 years, focused on students with complex needs. Currently, I am employed at a state education agency in a technical assistance role. While my early teaching years were focused on life or functional skills, increased understanding of student long-term results and teaching pedagogy has led to a bias towards standards-aligned classroom instructional access for all.
As such, I have strong beliefs that I controlled by seeking peer input and review of the survey items and through survey validation. In particular, I sought peer review to check my bias that including students with complex needs in standards-aligned classroom instruction will lead to independence, employment, and increased social connections with peers with and without disabilities.

The use of quantitative research design, using objective, clearly defined measures, limited the impact of personal bias. In addition, survey questions were carefully designed so that each response was equally valued and without judgment, bias, or preference. The email and directions clarify that the research is a part of the researcher’s doctoral program. I welcomed the insight of the doctoral committee members to remain objective in the design, analysis of the data, and discussion of the results.

**Conclusion**

The research design was a quantitative four-part survey delivered as a link in an email sent to self-contained, CDC, high school teachers in Tennessee public high schools. The invitation, survey design, and IRB approval were ethical safeguards for the participants throughout the research. The data from the survey were confidential, labelled only through a timestamp on Qualtrics, downloaded to a secure drive, and analyzed using SPSS to address the two research questions.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

An anonymous survey was conducted to address the research questions:

1. What does a self-contained (CDC) teacher do that leads to students applying for inclusive higher education programs?

2. What do self-contained (CDC) teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not?

**Process**

The survey was sent to potential participants identified in an online search of each public school district and high school website in the state of Tennessee. Charter schools were included when listed on the district website. Private schools were not included in the search. State special schools for the blind and deaf were also not included in the search.

The method for identifying the participants was an internet search of the publicly available district and school websites. The websites varied in design and detail. Some of the districts had separate webpages for each school that included a teacher directory while others had a single district directory. It was difficult to identify who was the targeted participants because districts used a wide range of labels. Some used identifiable roles for self-contained special education teachers including “CDC,” “comprehensive,” or “self-contained.” Many districts used more general identifiers for all special education teachers such as “special education” or “SPED.” In those districts, I sent all special education teachers the survey. In total, the survey was sent to 857 potential participants, but many of those, due to the lack of clarity of the directory, do not support students with complex needs and, therefore, were not expected to respond.
Participants were provided with my email address and the opportunity to ask questions. Eight individuals emailed to let me know they were not the target participants and asked if I would still want them to participate. I thanked them for their willingness to support the work and confirmed that they were not the intended participants. I also received messages of support and good wishes from a few of the participants.

The over-identification of target participants impacted the response rate as many of the emails went to individuals who were not expected to respond. The IRB-approved voluntary solicitation email was sent to 863 email addresses, 6 returned as undeliverable, resulting in 857 surveys sent. Responses were submitted by 76 participants. This would be a response rate of 8.87%. While this is a low rate, the participant identification process likely included many educators who are not the intended participant as they support students with high incidence disabilities, not complex needs. Also, “response rates should be considered only one indicator of the quality and usefulness of survey data (Robinson & Leonard, 2019).

The 76 individuals who submitted a response to the survey had a range of professional experience from less than 1 year to more than 15 years (see Table 1). The participants range in education from bachelor to doctoral degrees. The following are the results of the analysis of the data.

**Analysis**

**Participant Demographics**

The participants were primarily experienced educators with 59.2% reporting more than 15 years of teaching, 55.3% with 15 or more years of teaching special education, and 39.5% with more than 15 years of teaching high school special education. Conversely, the smallest group of participants was those with less than one year of experience at a rate of 6.6% with less than one
year of teaching experience and experience as a special education teacher and 11.8% with less than one year of high school special education teaching experience. Table 1 summarizes respondents’ teaching experience.

The participants also provided information on the highest degree they have earned (Table 2). The majority of participants obtained a masters (60.5%) and the fewest a doctorate (10.5%). Most of the participants identified as white and female, 72% and 77.6% respectively (Table 3). There was only one participant for each non-white race/ethnicity and non-binary. There were 15 males or 19.7% of the participants.

**Participants' Familiarity with TPSID Programs**

The survey included two questions related to the participant's prior knowledge of TPSID programs in general and/or through direct engagement as a volunteer or employee. More participants reported they were not familiar or a little familiar (44.8%) than familiar and very familiar (27.7%), with 27.6% no response (Table 4). The number of participants who reported they had volunteered or worked at a TPSID was 23.7% or less than one in four (Table 5). Slightly more than one-third (36.8%) of the participants teach in one of the eight Tennessee counties (8.5 %) that is the location of a TPSID program (Table 6).

The survey included questions to determine the frequency of participants who reported 0, 1-2, 3-6, or more than 7 current or former students applying for or accepted to a TPSID program (Table 7). For statistical analysis, the frequencies of students who applied for a TPSID (1-2 students, 3-6 students, and more than 7 students) were combined using a cross-tabulation, thus creating two groups: 1) no students applied, and 2) at least one student applied. The same process was done to create two groups relative to students who were accepted to a TPSID program: 1) no students accepted and 2) at least one student accepted.
Table 1

*Participant Teaching Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of teaching experience</th>
<th>Less than 1</th>
<th>1-5</th>
<th>6-10</th>
<th>11-15</th>
<th>More than 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of participants</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years teaching special education</th>
<th>Less than 1</th>
<th>1-5</th>
<th>6-10</th>
<th>11-15</th>
<th>More than 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of participants</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years teaching high school special education</th>
<th>Less than 1</th>
<th>1-5</th>
<th>6-10</th>
<th>11-15</th>
<th>More than 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of participants</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Participate Educational Preparation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate (EdD or PhD)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3

**Participant Race or Ethnicity and Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian, Indigenous, or Alaskan Native</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose not to respond</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>98.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose not to respond</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4

**Participant Familiarity with TPSID Programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familiarity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not familiar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little familiar</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very familiar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5

**Participant Volunteered or Worked for a TPSID**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volunteered</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

Participant Teaches in Shelby, Dyer, Madison, Davidson, Knox, Washington, Carter, or Sullivan County*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Tennessee TPSID programs are located in these counties.

Table 7

Number of Current or Former Students Who Have Applied or Been Admitted to a TPSID

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applied for admission</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>1-2</th>
<th>3-6</th>
<th>7 or more</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted to program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results for Question 1: What does a self-contained (CDC) teacher do that leads to students applying for inclusive higher education programs?

The first research question is centered on the actions of self-contained (CDC) teacher. The location, or LRE, in which the self-contained teacher provides instruction and special education services is one measure of what teachers do. The LRE setting was categorized in the survey into four options: 1) in a special education setting all or almost all day, 2) in a special education setting for more than half of the day, 3) in a special education setting for less than half of the day, 4) or rarely in a special education setting. Participants reported the LRE needed primarily by their student caseload, and thus, where they spend most of their workday. A chi-square test of independence was performed to evaluate the relationship between the primary LRE of the participant’s caseload and student(s) applying for a TPSID. The relationship between the variables was not significant $\chi^2 (3, N = 54) = 2.261, p < .52$, meaning there was no relationship between where the teacher is providing instruction and having students apply for a TPSID.

In a different section of the survey, participants were asked about where current or former student(s) who applied for a TPSID received their academic instruction. The survey response options were: 1) most often in a special education setting, 2) most often in a general education setting, 3) combination of special education and general education settings, or 4) the settings varied greatly for each student. The chi-square test of independence was performed to evaluate the location of academic instruction and applying for a TPSID. The relationship between the variables was not significant $\chi^2 (3, N = 40) = 7.344, p < .062$, meaning the location of academic instruction is not related to the student applying for a TPSID.

The analysis was repeated for students who were accepted to a TPSID. Participants were asked about the setting in which students who were accepted to a TPSID program received
academic instruction using the same four setting choices. The chi-square test of independence resulted in no significance, $\chi^2 (3, N = 38) = 5.574, p < .134$.

**Results for Question 2: What do self-contained (CDC) teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not?**

The second research question is focused on the relationship between the educational experiences of the student(s) who applied for a TPSID and those who did not. The survey began with a general question about the degree to which the respondent’s student participated in non-academic educational opportunities. Survey respondents reported the average, or general participation of their students, as: 1) frequently, 2) sometimes, 3) rarely, or 4) no participation in non-instructional school events. A chi-square test of independence was performed to evaluate the relationship between participation in non-instructional school events and applying to a TPSID. The relationship between the variables was significant, $\chi^2 (3, N = 41) = 9.621, p < .022$. In a chi-square analysis, “[T]he expected frequencies define the ideal, hypothetical sample distribution that would be obtained if the sample proportions were in perfect agreement with the proportions specified in the null hypothesis” (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017, p. 565). An examination of the expected frequency versus actual count frequencies for “no students applying to a TPSID” were more than expected for the participation rate of “did not” and “rarely participate” and less than expected in “frequently participates.” Conversely, the groups of “at least one student applying for a TPSID”, there were fewer than expected in the “did not” and “rarely participates” and more than expected in “sometimes” or “frequently participates.”

Non-instructional educational opportunities for students vary by interest, school offerings, and district policy. Participants were asked to report the participation of their students, in general, at school assemblies, football games, other sporting events, school dances,
homecoming events\textsuperscript{4}, clubs or councils, fundraising, as a member of a competitive sports team, and Special Olympics or Unified Sports. The results of the chi-square test of independence for each non-academic school event are summarized in Table 8.

The interaction between educational experiences was tested with the chi-square test for independence between participation in non-instructional school events and the setting in which the student primarily receives their academic instruction. The relationship was not significant, $\chi^2(9, N = 40) = 5.367, p < .801$. Enrollment in a TPSID program is the focus of this study. However, TPSID programs are only one of the many postsecondary options available to students with complex needs. Data were collected to determine other postsecondary options available to students in the schools and the frequencies of this data are reported in Table 9.

Students choose to apply to postsecondary schools or programs other than a TPSID. While these programs are not included in the scope of this research study, it is possible a student did not apply to a TPSID because they pursued another option. A frequency count provides a landscape of the program(s) students applied to as reported by their teacher (Table 10). Vocational Rehabilitation was the postsecondary option students applied to most, 59.2%, followed by the Employment Community First waiver program, 39.5%. The least applied for program among the choices included in the survey were programs provided through their private insurance, 9.2%. The frequency of students applying to no postsecondary school or program was 2.6%.

\textsuperscript{4} In Tennessee, Homecoming is a day or week of events (e.g., intramural sports, carnivals, food trucks, community event) ending with the football game. Homecoming dances are rare, this the term “events” was used as a general term.
Table 8

Chi-Square Results for Each Non-Instructional Educational Opportunity Surveyed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-instructional opportunity</th>
<th>Chi-square test of independence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School assemblies</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (2, N = 37) = .737, p &lt; .692$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football games</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (4, N = 37) = 3.583, p &lt; .465$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other sporting events</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (3, N = 37) = 2.182, p &lt; .535$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School dances</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (3, N = 37) = 1.040, p &lt; .791$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homecoming events</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (3, N = 37) = 4.859, p &lt; .182$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs or councils</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (4, N = 37) = 1.478, p &lt; .830$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (4, N = 37) = 2.407, p &lt; .661$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of a competitive sports team</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (3, N = 37) = 1.243, p &lt; .743$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Olympics or Unified Sports</td>
<td>$\chi^2 (4, N = 37) = 4.330, p &lt; .363$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9

Postsecondary Options Available within the Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community transition options</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult services provider invited to the IEP meetings</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition fair</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent meetings with provider(s)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tours and/or field trips to one or more postsecondary program</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other community transition options</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10

Postsecondary Options Student(s) Applied to Excluding TPSID Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend traditional college program</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCAT</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive higher education program</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational rehabilitation</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Community First (ECF) Choices</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Developmental Disabilities (DIDD)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>programs other than ECF Choices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional provider of adult disability services</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private insurance program (not TNCare)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private home care services paid by the family</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

An online survey link was sent to potential participants identified through a search of district and school websites. The data from the 76 submitted surveys were analyzed. A chi-square test of independence was performed comparing groups of no students applied for a TPSID and at least one current or former student has applied to a TPSID. Participation in a non-academic school event or activity was a significant result. This finding is not a statement of causation, but is an indication of a relationship between participation and application to a TPSID. The LRE of the student was not significant.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This Dissertation for the Doctor of Education study focused on the relationship between high school experiences and students’ decision to apply to a TPSID program. TPSID program participation is known to increase employment outcomes for individuals with complex needs (Moore & Schelling, 2015; Wehman et al., 2018). A voluntary, anonymous survey was emailed to Tennessee high school special educators identified through the school or district website. The research questions investigated were:

1. What does a self-contained (CDC) teacher do that leads to students applying for inclusive higher education programs?
2. What do self-contained (CDC) teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not?

The result of this study indicates that students who participate in non-academic school events or activities are more likely to apply to a TPSID program.

Discussion

Tennessee students with complex needs have significantly lower rates of postsecondary education and employment than their peers, including students with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., specific learning disability, language impairments, emotional disturbance) and non-disabled peers (Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, 2022). Modini, et. al., (2016) found that meaningful full-time employment is essential for fiscal independence, self-worth, and a connection to others. Moreover, completion of postsecondary education is an important pathway to employment. Results of this study revealed that the student’s participation in non-academic events is a significant indicator that a student with complex needs is more likely to apply to TPSID.
The first research question focused on what self-contained (CDC) teachers do that leads to students with complex needs applying to a TPSID program. IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) focus on teachers providing students with academic inclusionary learning within the general education setting. For example, ESSA (2015) requires schools “promote access to the general education curriculum” (§1111(b)(1)(E)(i)(II)) for all students, including students with disabilities. This requirement implies that there is greater benefit when students are taught within the general education environment. The analysis of the data, however, resulted in no significance, indicating that inclusion within the general education setting is not related to student participation in the postsecondary education TPSID programs. This is an interesting result in light of the legal mandates because participation in general education was an indicator of greater participation in a TPSID, which is known to increase postsecondary success (Smith et al., 2018).

The second research question, “What do self-contained (CDC) teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not,” added breadth to this study and revealed an unexpected result. Specifically, participation in non-academic events or activities such as football games, school dances, and Special Olympics was important for promoting student application for entry to a TPSID program.

This result adds a new consideration for increasing the interest of students and families in postsecondary education programs. Participation in non-academic events is not the same as “life skills” or “functional skills” (Ayers et al. 2011; Soukup et al., 2007) which are skills of daily living, communication, hygiene, etc. Furthermore, the events that occur within the school day for all students, such as assemblies, were no more nor less important than those events or activities that required planning and returning to a school setting outside school hours, such as school
dances or football games. There is one potential exception, homecoming. The analysis data for homecoming was different from the other school events, yet not significant. It is possible that a small number of participants led to a Type II error. “A Type II error occurs when a researcher fails to reject a null hypothesis that is really false” (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017, p. 237). This means, it is possible that homecoming was a variable that impacted the students applying to a TPSID, even though the analysis was not significant. Also, homecoming would have been a result using the survey validation data. Thus, there is sufficient evidence to warrant future research on the impact of participation in homecoming on students applying to a TPSID.

In summary, for research question one, the LRE in which teachers provide academic instruction was not significant, despite the legal mandates of IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015). There was a result to answer research question two; students who participate in non-academic school events or activities are more likely to apply to a TPSID program.

Implications

The result of this study has multiple implications for policymakers, districts, schools, families, and students. The IDEA Sec. 300.114 (2004) requires IEP teams to determine the LRE for a student in a manner that ensures “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled.” Not only is this a legal mandate, but the results of this study reinforced the importance of access to non-academic events and activities.

The results provide Tennessee policymakers with data for decision-making. Current political education priorities include school choice, vouchers, and school sports or club regulations. Each choice should consider the implications for students with disabilities, including students with complex needs. As a policy maker, the benefits to the state or community should
be a strong consideration. Student preparation that leads to employment will strengthen the taxpayer base, and ultimately benefit the community. Participation in a TPSID program leads to increased employment (Carter et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2018), thus, a policy that supports students with complex needs receiving access to extra-curricular activities and school non-academic events can potentially increase employment outcomes.

District and school leadership are responsible for hiring staff and allocating staff to meet the needs of the students. The results of this study identify the value of providing needed high school staffing allocations to provide students access to clubs, sports, assemblies, dances, and seasonal events such as homecoming. These events often occur outside the school hours however staff may be needed to support students with complex needs. Provision of services beyond the school day is a consideration protected under the rules of IDEA (2004). Furthermore, alternative transportation may be needed to ensure FAPE if the school activities occur outside the traditional school day.

Parenting is difficult. Parenting a student with complex needs brings additional challenges. As parents come to understand their child’s disability, it is understandable if they believe that certain opportunities or outcomes are not an option for their child and still want their child to have meaningful employment in the community (Blustein et al., 2016). The results of this study indicate that participation in non-academic school events may benefit their student, particularly if they are seeking postsecondary education at a TPSID. The parent, as a required member of the IEP team, can advocate for their student’s participation in extra-curricular activities including any needed supports from staff or special transportation.

Students also need to leverage their agency in communicating their preferences, interests, and strengths. They can do so in words or actions, but it is their voice we need to lift to better
understand how to provide them meaningful access to non-academic experiences. Considering students’ voices will be discussed further in future research suggestions.

**Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations of this study. First, this study had a small n-size. Statistical analysis with smaller n-sizes can have a higher risk of error. Due to the small n-size, a single response reported in error by a participant will impact the results. Also, this study was the first to use the survey. Repeated research with the tool is necessary to ensure the validity of the results.

Another limitation for generalizing the results is that the population was limited to Tennessee high-school self-contained special educators. The results may only apply to students with complex needs in the state of Tennessee. While there are federal regulations for special education, states are allowed to create additional regulations, creating variance across the states. Educator licensure rules, school accountability, and funding of higher education are a few areas in which states establish their own policies. The availability and focus on TPISD programs also vary across states. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if the results of this study would be similar in other states without future research.

Third, the results cannot be generalized to private schools or special schools. These schools were deliberately not included because they are not required to provide the same educational opportunities as a public school and therefore, could skew the results or lead to erroneous results. For example, a special school for students with disabilities does not provide students with academic instruction with non-disabled peers. However, this also means the result cannot be generalized to these schools.
Finally, the results of this study do not indicate causation. While participation in non-academic school events is a significant relationship to applying for a TPSID, it is not accurate to say participation leads to applying. The results do indicate that there is a relationship between participation in non-academic events and applying for a TPSID.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The participants of this study were self-contained teachers. While they are certainly experts on their actions and the experiences available within the school, they cannot fully speak for the students’ preferences, interests, and perspectives. Future studies that focus on students and adults with complex needs can add to the field. One recommendation is a study that examines the educational experiences of current TPSID students in comparison to individuals with similar disabilities participating in other postsecondary options and those who are not engaged in any postsecondary education, training, or employment.

Another recommendation is to repeat this study but with a different strategy for identifying participants and verifying their role prior to sending the survey. Ensuring the population is inclusive of self-contained teachers, and does not include other special educators, might add to the reliability and generalizability of the results. Increased participation of self-contained teachers may also ensure the number of participants in each demographic is large enough for analysis of characteristic effects. For instance, there were too few male participants to determine if gender was significant for student application to a TPSID program.

Also, repeating this study in different states or regions will add to the body of research. Results across states can inform policy at a federal level including the reauthorization of IDEA and ESSA, funding for state personnel development and TPSID programs, and educator preparation policies.
The survey used in this study has been validated but has only been used in this single study. Repeated research would add to the results. Expanding the research questions to include multiple postsecondary education and training options may provide information that guides schools further on the education experiences needed for students with complex needs.

A study that investigates the reasons why parents, families, and/or students choose to apply for a TPSID or postsecondary education program will add to the current research. Are the TPSID programs only attractive to a small number of students because of the interests of the student, or is application a result of readiness and self-efficacy? These questions and others that explore the student experience may further inform policymakers, educators, and parents.

The significance of participation in non-academic school events warrants further research to better understand which events are of greatest benefit for students with complex needs postsecondary success. Also, this study does not address why participation is significant. Qualitative studies that explore the student, family, and educator perspective can add to the understanding of how to best provide meaningful educational opportunities for students with complex needs that lead to postsecondary, long-term outcomes. One potential research question is how does participation in school events lead to a sense of belonging to the community? Another may be, what skills for postsecondary education readiness do students learn through non-academic school activities or events?

**Conclusion**

This was a quantitative study to explore two research questions:

1. What does a self-contained (CDC) teacher do that leads to students applying for inclusive higher education programs?
2. What do self-contained (CDC) teachers identify as the differences in educational experiences of students who apply for a TPSID and those who do not?

Special education teachers were emailed to participate in a voluntary, anonymous survey. The data analysis identified one significant result. Participation in non-academic events is related to the increased likelihood of applying to a TPSID. The result of this study has implications for policymakers, district and school leaders, educators, parents, and students to provide students with complex needs access to engage in non-academic events and activities. Future research is recommended to repeat the study in other states or with a different recruitment strategy and to examine the reasons why parents, families, or students choose to apply to a TPSID.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Postsecondary Readiness of Students with Cognitive Disabilities

Start of Block: Section 1: Respondent Demographics

Q1 Please tell me about your professional experience.

The number of years you have been a teacher:

- Less than 1 (1)
- 1-5 (2)
- 6-10 (3)
- 11-15 (4)
- More than 15 (5)

Q2 The number of years you have been a special education teacher:

- Less than 1 (1)
- 1-5 (2)
- 6-10 (3)
- 11-15 (4)
- More than 15 (5)
Q3 The number of years as a high school special education teacher:

- Less than 1 (1)
- 1-5 (2)
- 6-10 (3)
- 11-15 (4)
- More than 15 (5)

Q4 My highest degree is:

- bachelors (1)
- masters (2)
- doctorate (EdD or PhD) (3)

Q5 Did you ever volunteer or work in an inclusive higher education program?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Not sure (3)

Q6 Please tell me a little more about you.
I identify as:

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (3)
- American Indian, Indigenous, or Alaskan Native (4)
- Asian (5)
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (6)
- Multi-racial (7)
- Other (8) ________________________________

Q7 I identify as:

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary (3)
- Prefer not to say (4)
Q8 I teach in one of the following counties: Shelby, Dyer, Madison, Davidson, Knox, Washington, Carter, or Sullivan.

○ o Yes  (1)

○ o No  (2)

End of Block: Section 1: Respondent Demographics

Start of Block: Section 2: Inclusive Higher Education Programs

Q9 Inclusive higher education programs are college or community college programs for students with an intellectual and/or developmental disability who would not be admitted to a traditional college program. In Tennessee, the admission requirements allow for students who earned one of the four Tennessee diplomas (regular, alternate academic, occupational, or special education) to apply. The programs vary in length, residential options, and course expectations. In Tennessee we currently have eight programs: Access at East Tennessee State University  Eagle Access at Dyersburg State Community College  EDGE at Union University  IDEAL at Lipscomb University  Next Steps at Vanderbilt University  TigerEDGE at Tennessee State University  TigerLIFE at University of Memphis  FUTURE at University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Prior to this survey, had you heard of one or more of the TN inclusive higher ed programs?

○ Yes  (1)

○ No  (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Inclusive higher education programs are college or community college programs for students with a... = No
Q10 How would you rate your familiarity with inclusive higher education programs?

- Not familiar (1)
- A little familiar (2)
- Familiar (3)
- Very familiar (4)

Q11 The admissions requirements for each program vary slightly. How would you rate your familiarity with the admissions requirements for the inclusive higher education programs?

- I am not familiar with the admissions requirements. (1)
- I am slightly familiar with the admissions requirements for one of the programs. (2)
- I am somewhat familiar with the admissions requirements for one or more programs. (3)
- I am familiar with the admissions requirements for one or more programs. (4)

Q12 The inclusive higher education programs are small, accepting a small number of students annually. Have any current or former students applied for admission to an inclusive higher education program (in Tennessee or another state)?

- No current or former students have applied for admission. (If selected, survey will skip to question 7, 15, and 16) (1)
- 1-2 current or former students have applied for admission. (2)
- 3-6 current or former students have applied for admission. (3)
- 7 or more current or former students have applied for admission. (4)
Q13 The admission process to an inclusive higher education team requires the support of many adults. For each student who applied to an inclusive higher education program, who initiated the admission process? Please provide an answer for each student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Teacher and/or School Staff (1)</th>
<th>Parent or Guardian (2)</th>
<th>Student (3)</th>
<th>Adult Services Agency (4)</th>
<th>Other (5)</th>
<th>Unsure (6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
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<td>○</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 9</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 10</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q14 Have any current or former students been accepted to an inclusive higher education program?

- No current or former students have been accepted. (1)
- 1-2 current or former students have been accepted. (2)
- 3-6 current or former students have been accepted. (3)
- 7 or more current or former students have been accepted. (4)

Q15 There are many reasons why a family may choose to not apply for admission. Have you had a family or student who decided not to apply for admission?

- Yes (1)
- Maybe (2)
- No (3)

Skip To: End of Block If There are many reasons why a family may choose to not apply for admission. Have you had a family... = No
Q16 When a family decided not to apply, what was the reason? Check all that apply.

☐ Financial (1)
☐ Distance of the program from home or lack of residential options (2)
☐ The program didn’t match the student’s interests (3)
☐ The admission process is too complicated or long (4)
☐ Safety concerns (5)
☐ Transportation challenges (6)
☐ Family did not share their reason(s) (7)

Q17 Other reasons families decided not to apply for inclusive higher education that were not included in the previous question.

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

End of Block: Section 2: Inclusive Higher Education Programs

Start of Block: Section 3: The High School Experience

Q18 This section of the survey is designed to gather information to better understand the high school experiences available to your students as they prepared for transition to adulthood.
There are many types of high school programs for students with complex and/or cognitive disabilities. Please share a little about your program. My program is primarily:

- Self-contained (Students are taught in a special education setting.) (1)
- Inclusion (Students are taught in a general education setting, with or without support.) (2)
- Mixed (Students are taught in a mix of both general education and special education settings.) (3)
- Consult (I support the adults who are teaching the students.) (4)

Q19 The grades/ages I teach include (check all that apply):

- Grades or ages prior to high school (1)
- Grade 9 (2)
- Grade 10 (3)
- Grade 11 (4)
- Grade 12 (5)
- Post-grade 12 through age 22. (6)

Q20 To meet the needs of students, teachers often work as a team, with each teacher focusing on one portion of the students’ education. A teacher may be the primary person responsible. For example, they may be the person responsible for planning and delivering instruction or may be the case manager for transition plan development. A teacher may have a secondary role. For example, they support individual students in accessing the instruction delivered by another teacher, or they share data for the IEP team to consider at the next meeting.
Which of the following is your **primary responsibility** for the students with complex and/or cognitive disabilities? Check all that apply.

- [ ] Core content instruction (including modified instruction): English language arts, math, science, and/or social stud (1)
- [ ] Co-teaching in general education (2)
- [ ] Intervention (IEP specific intervention on measurable annual goals) (3)
- [ ] Transition (includes work-based learning, career readiness, and community-based instruction) (4)
- [ ] IEP development and case management (5)
- [ ] Behavior intervention (6)
- [ ] Related services (7)
- [ ] Other (8) __________________________________________________

Q21 *IEP teams are charged with developing a plan to provide services to a student within their least restrictive environment. Therefore, it is essential that schools support a continuum of services.*

Please take a moment to consider the least restrictive environment for each of your students.
Which of the following is the best description of the least restrictive environments needed by your students this year:

- Most of my students are in a special education setting all or almost all day. (1)
- Most of my students are in a special education setting for more than half of the day. (2)
- Most of my students are in a special education setting for less than half of the day. (3)
- Most of my students are rarely in a special education setting. (4)

Skip To: Q24 If IEP teams are charged with developing a plan to provide services to a student within their least...

Q22 The least restrictive environment is different for each student. For those students who are attending one or more classes in a general education setting, please describe the content of the class. Check all that apply.

- Core content courses (English language arts, math, science, or social studies) (1)
- Career and technical courses and/or work-based learning (2)
- Arts (theater, art, media) (3)
- Physical education (4)
- Other (5) __________________________________________________

Q23 High school experiences include activities and opportunities outside of the classroom and school day. Students with complex needs may or may not choose to participate in these
experiences. Please share how, in general, your students are attending/participating in the following activities this school year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No students attend or participate (1)</th>
<th>Only one or two students attend or participate (2)</th>
<th>Some students attend or participate (3)</th>
<th>Most students attend or participate (4)</th>
<th>Unsure (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School assemblies (1)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football games (2)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other sporting events (3)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School dances (4)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homecoming events (5)</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs or councils (6)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising (7)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of a competitive sports team (8)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Olympics or Unified sports (9)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q24 In the first section of this survey you answered questions about inclusive higher education. In this section you shared information about your high school program. For the next few questions we will ask about the high school experiences of those students who applied for admission to an inclusive higher education program.

The students who applied for admission to an inclusive higher education program received their academic instruction:

- Most often in a special education setting (1)
- Most often in a general education setting (2)
- In a combination of special education and general education settings (3)
- The settings varied greatly for each student. (4)

Q25 The students who applied for admission to an inclusive higher education program:

- Did not participate in non-instructional school events or activities. (1)
- Participated rarely in non-instructional school events or activities. (2)
- Participated sometimes in non-instructional school events or activities. (3)
- Participated frequently in non-instructional school events or activities. (4)

End of Block: Section 3: The High School Experience

Start of Block: Section 4: Postsecondary and Transition Planning

Q26 There are multiple postsecondary options for students with complex and/or cognitive disabilities including Vocational Rehabilitation, regional services, and employment. The question in this section will provide an overview of the postsecondary options your students have considered.

Transition planning is individualized, driven by student goals. Which of the following options
are available to help students and families learn about transition options in your community. Check all that apply.

- Adult services provider invited to the IEP meetings (1)
- Transition fair (2)
- Parent meetings with provider(s) (3)
- Tours and/or field trips to one or more postsecondary program (4)
- Other (5) __________________________________________________
Q27 Postsecondary options vary by the area in which the student lives. Please indicate the postsecondary options your students have applied for while in high school. Check all that apply.

☐ Attend traditional college program (1)
☐ TCAT (2)
☐ Inclusive higher education program (3)
☐ Vocational Rehabilitation (4)
☐ Employment Community First (ECF) Choices (5)
☐ Department of Developmental Disabilities (DIDD) programs other that ECF Choices (6)
☐ Regional provider of adult disability services (7)
☐ Private insurance program (not TNCare) (8)
☐ Private home care services paid by the family (9)
☐ None (10)
☐ Unsure (11)

Q28 Any other postsecondary options that your students have considered?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Q29 Anything else I should know that was not included in the survey?

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Directions and Overview Email to Potential Participants

The following survey is a research study as a part of my doctoral studies in educational leadership at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

The focus of the study is educational experiences that lead students with complex and/or cognitive disabilities to apply for an inclusive higher education program. “Students with complex needs” as used as used in this survey, refers to students with significant cognitive disabilities and/or with multiple disabilities, and/or are significantly impacted by a disability (i.e. autism, Down syndrome) resulting in needs similar to students with complex needs. This group of students comprises approximately one percent of the population.

Inclusive higher education programs are college or community college programs for students with an intellectual and/or developmental disability who would not be admitted to a traditional college program. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has funded the start-up of many inclusive higher education programs across the United States through the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities grants.

The questions in this survey will ask you about your familiarity with inclusive higher education programs, your students’ interest and/or participation in inclusive higher education programs, their high school experiences, postsecondary and transition planning, and about your education, teaching experience, and demographics.

The survey should take approximately 15 minutes for you to respond. There are 26 multiple choice questions and three open response questions for you to offer any additional information. Responses will be anonymous, known only by a unique identifier assigned by the software. No single response or identifiable information will be included in the study. Furthermore, the dissertation will not be published. Should the data be used for future publication, the responses will remain confidential. The data will be maintained on the researcher’s private secure site until the completion of the dissertation and then kept on a secure external hard drive.

This study was reviewed and approved by The University of Tennessee’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact me, Alison Gauld at agauld@vols.utk.edu, or faculty advisor, Dr. Mary Lynne Derrington, mderring@utk.edu, 865-247-1281.
Appendix C: Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Alison Gauld, University of Tennessee Knoxville doctoral candidate, is conducting a research study to determine the impact of high school educational experiences on students with significant cognitive disabilities and/or complex needs pursuit of postsecondary education. You are being asked to complete this survey because you are a high school self-contained (CDC) teacher.

Participation is voluntary. The survey will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. If you choose to participate, you will submit the completed survey directly to the researchers, and your responses will be anonymous.

The study involves no foreseeable serious risks. We ask that you try to answer all questions; however, if there are any items that make you uncomfortable or that you would like to skip, please do not respond to those items.

The researchers and the University of Tennessee may access the data for the purposes of this study. The data will not be shared, and the data will be secured in accordance with the Institutional Review Board to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

The data will be maintained on the researcher’s private secure site, kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed, and then destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns feel to contact Alison Gauld, agauld@utk.vols.edu, 720-979-9508.

The survey begins on the next page.

If you would prefer not to participate, please do not fill out the survey.

If you consent to participate, please complete the survey.
VITA

Alison Amy Gauld is a special educator. She taught within the public schools in Arizona and Colorado for more than 20 years. Alison left the public schools to work for the Tennessee Department of Education where she is the Low Incidence and Autism Coordinator. She earned her Doctor of Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.