ABSTRACT

THE ADMINISTRATOR/EDUCATOR INFLUENCE ON THE

TRANSITION OF STUDENTS, WITH IDEA SERVICES,

FROM K-12 TO POSTSECONDARY/COLLEGE

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The transition for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) from K-12 to postsecondary education, specifically college, is a challenging one. The support they receive with an IEP in K-12 is structured with requirements in place that guide them through the completion of their K-12 experience. Once they transition out of K-12, those supports that were mandated are altered widely. Did the political framework of the administrator/educator affect the transition of students with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) services from K-12 to post-secondary/college during the COVID 19 pandemic? Examining this transition across multiple districts and administrators in California’s Central Valley, this thesis provides first-hand insight and an understanding of the process, along with recommendations, on how to support students as they are being advised to meet their educational goals or needs. With the COVID-19 pandemic it is uncertain whether this will be a factor in the outcomes.

Laura L. Clark

December 2021

THE ADMINISTRATOR/EDUCATOR INFLUENCE ON THE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS, WITH IDEA SERVICES, FROM K-12 TO POSTSECONDARY/COLLEGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts Public Administration

in the College of Social Sciences

California State University, Fresno

December 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank those who contributed to the completion of my thesis. First and foremost, to my committee for allowing me to pursue a topic that is near and dear to my heart. Their unwavering advice, time, and expertise both in the classroom and beyond made it possible for me to take on this endeavor. Dr. Cline and Dr. Hansen, for inspiring me with your instruction and encouragement. Dr. Bryant, my thesis chair, you helped me to persevere and to continue this adventure even during your sabbatical. Thank you for pushing me to find the right words to express what we both know I really wanted to get across. Dr. Torgerson, my subject matter expert, whose unparalleled dedication kept me on track even when I wanted to take a different path. To both Cheryl McDonald and Dr. Mahoney for providing the opportunity for my participation in the Kremen School of Education and Human Development’s special education classes. This perspective and interaction offered a wonderful insight into the behind-the-scenes world of the special education teacher training. To all the dedicated professionals who took the time to participate in the survey for this thesis, your time and genuine interest made this study possible. Dr. Emerzian, Kathy Wage, Karri Hammerstrom, Jennie Johnson and Jennifer Sullivan your input, insight and expertise were exceptional on this journey.

To Ronald, Debra, Caleigh, Rosie, and Chuck at the Fresno State Graduate Student Success Center your patience, kindness, and dedication to me and this endeavor was unparalleled. To Juli, for the countless hours that we spent wordsmithing.

To my colleagues at Fresno State including Dean Yerrick, Paula, Caty, Micheline, Dr. Barker and Heather, your steadfast support is greatly appreciated. To fellow MPA graduate David Santos-Garcia, you never gave up on me and continued to stand next to me throughout this entire process.

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To the women of the Rotary Club of Fresno as well as Victoria, Sandra, Patty, Elizabeth and Metra, your continued conversations and moral support were just what I needed when I was sure that I could not spend one more hour on this project.

To my surrogate parents, George and Nancy; George, may you rest in peace and, Nancy, thank you for believing in me. To Carolyn and Betty, not only for your support, but also for connecting me with Kerri whose brilliant mind sees numbers and statistics as the grandest of adventures! To Erin, for your continued cheery nature and unwavering roomie friendship.

Jill, I remember when we had the discussion about graduate school and how we were going to change our trajectory in life. We did it my dear friend! Finally, to my family, you are the wind beneath my wings. To my puppies Polly, Abbie, and Zara. Polly, may you rest in peace. Abbie, thank you for sitting with me day in and day out while I write, and to Zara who keeps me laughing. To my sister, your continual phone calls of encouragement and support really made a difference. To Aaron, you are the inspiration for this study. Your bravery and determination compelled me to try to help other students reach for their dreams. To Adam, Xuemei and Emilie, you not only encouraged and taught me how to go back to school but had faith that I could do this. And to my husband Larry, you stood right next to me, proofread, and held my hand, not only as we survived the pandemic, but every step of the way throughout this process.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to college is important for any student. Parents want the best for their children and send them off with much anticipation. Parents of students with disabilities often take on the burden of making sure their children are getting the support needed to meet their transition goals because schools simply do not devote enough resources to this part of special education (Mader & Butrymowicz, 2017). Some schools have a coordinator or administrator focused on transition services. However more commonly, special education teachers, with a full teaching load, are in charge of overseeing transition plans. Often, parents report there is not a thoughtful discussion about whether their child is on board with the transition plans and what could be done in high school to help them. Once in college many of these students are not prepared to advocate for themselves and do not finish their degree. The compliance focused, bureaucratic method of implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in K-12 may not work for all students in preparing them for their eventual transition into any postsecondary experience.

Before 1975, many individuals with disabilities in the United States of America were relegated to institutions where they were minimally housed, fed, and clothed. Families had very little input in the decisions regarding their loved one because assessments, education, and rehabilitation were not offered (California Department of Education [CDE], n.d.-a; Diament, 2020a; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Legislative Analyst’s Office [LAO], 2019; United States Department of Education [USDE], n.d., 2011). By the 1980s, IDEA had been enacted and was amended to add transition goals and objectives to a student’s IEP. In California, the law went even further mandating transition requirements to be in place by age 16. Then a paradigm shift occurred, in 2017 when the United States Supreme Court ruled on the landmark case,

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*Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1* (2017), which held that schools must “offer an IEP reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress” given their own unique situation through new and improved transition programs (*Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1,* 2017) (CDE, n.d.-a; Diament, 2020a; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Leader-Janssen et al., 2012; Lo, 2012; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; PACER, n.d.-b; USDE, n.d). It raised the expectations that services alone do not meet the requirements, but some success for the student must be demonstrated. For the first time, the ceiling was lifted for students with disabilities. It allowed them to dream about what they wanted for their future. Thus, the limitations of the Bureaucratic political framework that unintentionally set the bar at simply being compliant was removed. This study will examine the practices and values of special educators with an additional look at transition during the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study examined the responses of education professionals in Special Education (SPED) from a series of questions examining the perspectives of the public administrator/educator. Specifically, a look at their role in the transition of students who require special education services from K-12 to postsecondary (PS) in the Central San Joaquin Valley. The results will demonstrate the political framework, i.e. the utilization of the Human Relations (HR) or Bureaucratic (B) model, of SPED services when implementing services for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) during transition. In addition, the results will yield perspectives on the challenges, utilization of research-proven practices, and some areas that warrant further examination.

**Research Questions**

Does a preferred policy framework of an administrator/teacher affect the transition of students, with IDEA services in California, from K-12 to postsecondary

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education, through the knowledge and application of researched based practices in Individualized Transition Plans (ITPs)? How have these processes been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Hypothesis**

It is hypothesized that when administrators use research and evidence-based practices that are known to predict secondary transition success for students with disabilities, they are primarily working through the Human Relations policy framework. If they use this humanistic model that has been shown to promote success, the students have an improved service and are better prepared for post-secondary success. Further, the theoretical framework being used makes a difference in approach since the Bureaucratic model has been primarily utilized in the compliance environment for special education. Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, special education and the ITP process have been greatly affected because of a lack of access to postsecondary transition resources.

**Context of the Study**

This study was conducted in the Central Valley of California. The institutions must follow both federal and state law in service individuals with disabilities. It was also conducted during the “shut down” phase of the COVID 19 pandemic in California. The effects of this unprecedented event will be considered.

**Significance of the Study**

This study will investigate evidence of a preferred theoretical framework, the HR or B model, when implementing services for students with IEPs during transition and during a pandemic. This information will be significant in helping to equip the next generation of special education administrators and educators with added perspective

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regarding implementation of best practices, that can help future generations. It will also inform educators and institutions of some of the effects of the pandemic.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition to college is a milestone in any student’s life, but for students with identified needs this juncture can be life changing. Their transition is typically affected by laws, self-efficacy, institutional practices, and a new living environment. In our current context, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is also having a dramatic effect on instruction, learning, and the entire post-secondary experience.

This chapter explores information on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), education laws at the federal and state level, including a brief history and the status of these laws. It also provides background information on the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) implementation during K-12 and the state of California’s expectation of post-secondary education for students who are designated as disabled. It also examines how colleges regard students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), or disabilities, as they apply for college and what the process is to acknowledge their needs with accommodations and institutional implementation. There is further examination of best practices in transition such as self-efficacy, vocational training, life skills, and time management are discussed. Finally, this information is reviewed in the context of COVID-19 and applied to the transition process for students and institutions.

**Theoretical Framework**

Public administration provides two models to help us understand administrator decision making in the educational transition process, Bureaucratic Management Theory and Human Relations Management Theory. Services provided through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) 1975 were developed primarily through a legislative process and development of regulations for states and districts followed. Services at the time were based on a medical model and disability categories drove the

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services and placement. An example is the Discrepancy Model, which is a common practice utilizing statistical norms, including test scores, to determine eligibility for special education (SPED) services such as the IEP, which has been used for decades.

**Bureaucratic Management Theory**

Created by Max Weber at the end of the 19th century, Bureaucratic Management Theory advocates hiring based not only on skill but also personality. Similar to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s Scientific Management Theory of 1909, Weber argued that each employee should have very specific job expectations with standardization for productivity, detailed record keeping, and a division of labor. Contrary to Taylor, Weber also considered human emotion as essential (Hodson et al., 2013).

**SPED Utilizing the Bureaucratic**

**Management Theory**

As a result of EHA, the Discrepancy model was created. This approach to determining eligibility of students for SPED education services would be analogous to Weber’s Bureaucratic Management Theory in that it utilized the comparison of test scores and diminished human factors such as classroom interventions. A student would qualify for special education, or an IEP, if they had one of thirteen conditions, and if they were two standard deviations below the norm when comparing intelligence to achievement scores. An IEP was often carried out by the administrator with disability service experts providing services and advice about future steps, while both the students and parents passively listened. Some student challenges could be diagnosed through testing at the school site, resulting in the determination of a disability (a term used in educational settings under IDEA) versus a disorder (medical term in the *DSM-5*), which

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had to be diagnosed by a medical doctor.1 The team considers all testing data from both the school district and outside sources (medical). Under this approach students may be provided special classes, extra assistance or time to complete tasks, or support services with the near singular goal of seeing the student achieve completion of their K-12 education, while meeting federal requirements. This approach was known as a ‘Deficit Model’ and the students were viewed as having been the problem and needing to be changed; not the classroom instruction needing to be changed. In addition to the Discrepancy model, compliance reviews of SPED services and requirements aligned to federal and state funding also emphasized the Bureaucratic Management Theory.

**Human Relations Management Theory**

Centered on human interactions and relationships, the Humans Relations Management Theory, developed by Elton Mayo in 1927, advocates conducting business focused on supporting people in order to maximize worker productivity. To test his theory, he conducted a study that ran for 270 weeks, from 1928 to 1932, at Chicago’s Western Electric Hawthorne Works Plant. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the factory lighting affected productivity. Mayo initially found that any changes toward additional lighting resulted in increased productivity. In a deeper investigation of the study, Landsberger (1958) found that increased human interaction and researcher interest in what the employees were doing was what increased the productivity. This motivational effect became known as the Hawthorne Effect, which led to the evolution of

1 IDEA, Section 300.8 (2021) defines disability as, “a child evaluated in accordance with §§300.304 through 300.311 [of IDEA] as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as “emotional disturbance”), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services”.

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the Human Relations Management Theory emphasizing the importance of individual and group dynamics (Caillier, 2010; Peek, 2020).

**SPED Utilizing the Human Relations**

**Management Theory**

In 2004, IDEA was reauthorized with additional options for determining eligibility for special education including Response to Intervention2(RTI2)/Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). RTI2indicates that in order to be a well-rounded intervention, general education and categorical programs need to be combined with SPED in core instruction to provide support to all students (California Department of Education [CDE], 2020; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). MTSS is focused on equipping California educators with instruction and clarity to provide equitable access for all students to achieve Common Core State Standards (CCSS). RTI2, combined with additional ideas and approaches, are all part of the MTSS process (CDE, 2020). These strengths-based methods allow the IEP team to look at the student as a person/human, not a deficit. The parents are encouraged to participate with the option for the student to lead their own IEP, thereby encouraging self-determination and advocacy. Qualification for eligibility is still based on student learning needs, but the idea is to look for student strengths, with a tiered approach, and not just the weaknesses. This includes collaboration between IEP team members, parents, students, and service providers to develop a plan, in contrast with previous models where administrators and experts worked together to develop a plan, while parents and students were passive bystanders.

When the United States Supreme Court ruled on the landmark case, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1* (2017), it questioned what constitutes “educational benefit” within school districts in order to provide students with disabilities a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). This ruling was the first time that the Human Relations Management Theory was utilized when meeting FAPE standards. In the

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Supreme Court’s decision, it states that schools must offer an IEP “reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress” given their own unique situation (*Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1,* 2017). Progress suggests that just offering services is not enough. The services must have calculated success. This ruling exceeded what many lower courts had previously required, which was simply compliance without a benefit measure. This case provides a watershed moment because service providers are now held to a higher level of success. Service providers now must provide instruction and services that meet the individual student needs, which relates to the political framework of the Human Relations Management Theory. The benefit would also be in the preparation of students for vocational success through new and improved transition programs (CDE, n.d.-a; Diament, 2020b; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Leader-Janssen et al., 2012; Lo, 2012; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; PACER, n.d.-b; USDE, n.d.).

This transition, in the way students are found to be eligible for special education services, from Bureaucratic Management Theory to the Human Relations Management Theory will be studied throughout the literature review and in the interviews. In addition, the implementation by and influence of the administrator in this process will also be reviewed.

**Disability Law**

**Individuals with Disabilities Education**

**Act (IDEA)**

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975 was a pivotal shift in the lives of individuals with disabilities in the United States of America. The EHA, signed by President Gerald Ford, guaranteed FAPE to each child with a disability in every state and locality across the country. Before this law passed,

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many who had intellectual disabilities, along with those who were considered mentally ill, were relegated to institutions where they were minimally housed, fed, and clothed. Families had very little input in the decisions regarding their loved one, because assessments, education, and rehabilitation were not offered (CDE, n.d.-a; Diament, 2020a; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; LAO, 2019; USDE, n.d., 2011). These families, and the associated agencies, were the first to advocate for persons with disabilities in the 1950s and 1960s, leading the federal government to pass some of the first special education legislation. Early laws included the training of Special Education (SPED) teachers in early childhood education and for the teachers of the Deaf and/or hard of hearing (USDE, n.d.). Yet, the primary challenges that persisted during this time were that children with disabilities were still being provided inadequate education, refused enrollment in public schools, or sent to institutions (Disability Justice, n.d.; LAO, 2019).

This practice took a dramatic turn in 1972 with the rulings of two critical cases: The *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (“P.A.R.C”) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of Education*. “In both landmark cases, the Courts interpreted the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to give parents specific rights, struck down local laws that excluded children with disabilities from schools, and established that children with disabilities have the right to a public education” (Disability Justice, 2020, p. 1). In response to the ruling a federal law was passed, the EHA of 1975, with special education designed to meet each student’s individual needs with specific protections for both the students and their parents. Backed with financial funding on state and local levels, this law affected both children who had limited access to appropriate education including over one million students with disabilities who had previously been completely excluded from public education (CDE, n.d.-b; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Public Interest Law Center, n.d.; USDE, 2020b).

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In 1977, EHA was implemented through California Department of Education code with the creation of the Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA). These mandated geographical boundaries were formed, in collaboration with county agencies and school districts, to ensure that the children within the boundaries are provided special education and, by law, there is funding to follow these services (CDE, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Ondrasek et al., 2020).

Progress continued when federal reauthorizations in the 1980’s and 1990’s shifted the identified populations to include early intervention for children born with disabilities, those with traumatic brain injury, and autism (Dragoo & Cole, 2019; USDE, n.d.). In 1990, the EHA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and transition to post-secondary life became a focus with the individual transition plan (ITP). In the last part of the century, access became the focus so that students with special needs could participate in the general curriculum and parents now had a resource to resolve disputes with the local educational agencies (LEAs) (CDE, n.d.-a; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Lo, 2012; PACER, n.d.-b; USDE, n.d.).

The 2000s brought an increased focus on the quality of education with new requirements, training, and oversight providing funding for teachers in special education, research-based interventions for early education focused on determining eligibility, assessments of academic achievement standards, legal protections, and increased parental rights. As the decade continued, regulations included clarifications or revisions to the IDEA. Most notable were those prompted by Rosa’s Law in 2017, replacing the term “mental retardation” in federal law with “intellectual disability” or “intellectual disabilities”. In the same year, the United States Supreme Court ruled on the landmark case, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1* (2017), which questioned what constitutes an “educational benefit” for children with disabilities, in order to meet FAPE standards. The Supreme Court ruling states that schools must “offer an IEP reasonably

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calculated to enable a child to make progress” given their own unique situation (*Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1,* 2017) which exceeded what many lower courts had previously required. This law supports the preparation of students for vocational success through new and improved transition programs (CDE, n.d.-a; Diament, 2020b; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Leader-Janssen et al., 2012; Lo, 2012; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; PACER, n.d.-b; USDE, n.d). This change in regulations and focus on quality services, not just compliance, advanced the possibilities for students in special education.

**Special Education Services K-12 in**

**IDEA**

According to analysts, Dragoo and Cole (2019) of the Congressional Research Service, state funded local education agencies (LEAs) are legally responsible for conducting a process known as *Child Find* to identify and evaluate children in their area who may have disabilities. Regardless of whether or not these children, ages birth to 21, are in public or private schools, homeless, wards of the state, or migrant children, an appropriate evaluation must take place before the child can receive special education services under IDEA or Section 504. Once the child is identified, a team of specialists, including the parents or guardians, is convened utilizing special education and related services to create an individual education program (IEP); thus, assuring a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). The IEP set forth has legal safeguards in place so that the child with disabilities and their parents, have due process rights and can challenge the process in court (CDE, n.d.-a; Diament, 2020a; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Leader-Janssen et al., 2012; LAO, 2019; PACER, n.d.-b; USDE, 2011).

There are two requirements to qualify for services under IDEA. The first, the child may have one of the 13 conditions specified in the act. The second, special

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education and/or the related services would make an impact so that they could benefit from public education (Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-b). If a child with a disability does not qualify under the act, but they still need support, they would not receive special education through an IEP, however, with the latitude provided under the act, states have the flexibility to create categories with specific requirements, such as “other health impairments,” as long as children who would otherwise qualify are not excluded (CDE, n.d.-a; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Leader-Janssen et al., 2012).

Of the three federal laws addressing individuals with disabilities, the IDEA is focused exclusively on education with a set age limit of 21 years or when the student graduates or legally exits high school. However, both Section 504 and ADA are broader in their definition of disability. Section 504 is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination in programs and activities that receive federal funding. Since Section 504 includes all schools, K-12 through post-secondary, students with disabilities who do not qualify under IDEA may still be able to receive services. Any person who has a documented, qualified impairment, which limits at least one major life activity, would be eligible (The Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA] National Network, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a.). The ADA protects individuals with any “impairment like seeing, hearing, walking, or thinking” (ADA National Network, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a.) in all aspects of life. There are no age limitations or restrictions. K-12 schools, colleges, and universities are all required to be ADA compliant.

Finally, impairments covered by Section 504 or ADA are not relegated to a particular list like they are under IDEA. So, if a disability is covered under the IDEA it will generally also be covered by Section 504 and the ADA, however, the reverse is not true (ADA National Network, n.d.; CDE, n.d.-a; Diament, 2020b; Disability Justice, n.d.; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; USDE, 2011). For example, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is an eligible condition for 504 services, but in

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IDEA it would have to be a part of one of the thirteen eligible conditions. In section 504 the language even states if someone is simply regarded as having a disability, they are eligible. Appendix A from Dragoo and Cole (2019) clearly lays out the differences in each category.

The IEP Team includes a variety of professionals whose various roles are critical in creating the most effective learning environments for students with disabilities. The team of stakeholders who come together to implement IEPs may include teachers (both generalists and special educators), administrators, parents, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists. The options discussed during these evaluations focus on strategic services and placements, effective accommodations, and adaptations. Services required are determined, as well as what setting services should be provided in. The IDEA requires the team to assume the least restrictive environment (LRE). The LRE is typically the general education classroom unless the student’s needs cannot be met there. For students with IEPs, in general education classrooms, effective teacher collaboration is essential for success. According to Leader-Janssen et al. (2012), careful planning is the key to successful collaboration. As the IEP process progresses it is imperative that the collaboration within the team continues thereby insuring that the IEP objectives are met (CDE, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Dragoo & Cole; 2019; Leader-Janssen et al., 2012; LAO, 2019; Lo, 2012; PACER, n.d.-b).

In addition to compliance, IDEA also has specific language regarding parent involvement. Lo (2012) emphasized that parents are encouraged, but also have a legal right to have an active role in their child’s IEP. Challenges can surface when the culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds of the parents are not understood. This is especially true with immigrant families not familiar with the IEP process, therefore, language specific communication welcoming the family to the school, while emphasizing the importance of their participation, is critical in developing effective

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partnerships. Before the IEP meeting invitation is sent to the parents, a separate meeting with the teacher is recommended to confirm and to preview all the elements of the evaluation process including: the purpose, time commitment, parental rights, as well as planning next steps. Understanding both culture and language is crucial during translation by an interpreter, who is sometimes not a specialist in the field, and may omit some of the more complicated and specific language. School administrators can offer training and workshops, with interpreters and for parents of children with disabilities, so they can meet and hear from other families to better understand the process. Parents are likely to relate to others who can speak the same language and have experienced similar challenges (CDE, n.d.-a; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; Lo, 2012).

Through *Child Find*, required of the school districts in the 135 California SELPA regions, the identification of a category for students with disabilities is the key to qualification under IDEA. Section 504 and the ADA, however, are less restrictive and more civil rights oriented when providing services. Once the child with disabilities is identified as qualifying for an IEP under IDEA, the success of the collaboration of the team is paramount for the child’s future outcome. Examining the process through the lens of Human Relations Management Theory, incorporating parents and community while being responsive to cultural diversity are key elements to the future success of these students.

**Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

The ADA protects the civil rights of individuals who (1) have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, (2) have a record of such an impairment, or (3) are regarded as having such an impairment. Major life activities include walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working,

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caring for oneself, and performing manual tasks (ADA National Network, n.d.; CDE, n.d.-a; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a.).

While the IDEA provides protections to students with disabilities ages birth through 21, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is a broader civil rights guarantee for persons with disabilities in the United States (Eastern Oklahoma State College [EOSC], n.d.; PACER, n.d.-a).The ADA has three titles that address employment, state, and local government and public accommodations and commercial facilities (CDE, n.d.-a; Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a; United States Department of Justice [USDJ], n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). Title I prohibits both public and private employers, with 15 or more employees, from discriminating against both current and potential employees with disabilities who are otherwise qualified (PACER, n.d.-a; USDJ, n.d.-a). Title II adds to the prohibition on discrimination established by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 U.S.C. 794, to all activities of state and local governments regardless of whether these entities receive federal financial assistance (Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a; USDJ, n.d.-b). Title III mandates that places of “public accommodation” (e.g., schools, restaurants etc.) must be accessible to those with disabilities (Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a; USDJ, n.d.-c).

In 2008, amendments to the ADA stated that the definition of disability was meant to be interpreted broadly and the list of life activities was expanded to include reading, concentrating, standing, lifting, bending, etc. The term “substantially limits” was also interpreted broadly to include additional disabling conditions such as depression, diabetes, asthma or anxiety, or digestive disorders whether they are episodic or in remission. Use of mitigating measures such as medication or assistive technology that lessen the impact of a person’s disability does not disqualify a person for services (Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a).

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**Higher Education Institutions and**

**ADA**

According to both Title II and III of the ADA, equal access must be provided for students with disabilities during postsecondary education. Title II covers the publicly funded universities, community colleges, and vocational schools while Title III covers those which are privately funded. This is in addition to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act requiring that these colleges and universities, that are federally funded, make their programs accessible to students with disabilities (ADA National Network, n.d.; CDE, n.d.-a; Dragoo & Cole; PACER, n.d.-a; USDJ, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). The enforcement of both Section 504 and the ADA comes from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education (Dragoo & Cole, 2019; PACER, n.d.-a; USDE, 2011).

**Transition Services**

**Transition Law**

Beginning in the 1980’s the EHA was amended to provide support for transition service initiatives from high school to postsecondary life. There are six sections of the IDEA that are specific to transition: when to begin including transition goals and objectives in the IEP; transition services; IEP team composition; transfer of rights at age of majority; and requirements for exiting high school programs (PACER, n.d.-b). In California, the individual transition plan must be in place by age 16 and has to include a strategy along with the responsibility for employment and postschool living objectives, a referral to the appropriate community agency, as well as linking the student to community resources, job placement, or other follow-up services (USDE, n.d.).

**ITP services**

As the IEP process continues, a critical juncture is the individual transition plan (ITP) focusing on the move to post-secondary life. In the state of California, the ITP must

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be in place by age 16 with the following six sections: (1) ensuring free and appropriate public education (FAPE); (2) transition goals and objectives in the IEP; (3) transition services; (4) IEP team composition; (5) transfer of rights at age of majority; and (6) requirements for exiting high school programs (CDE, n.d.-a; PACER, n.d.-b). The components of implementation include designating a strategy specifying responsibility for employment and postschool living objectives, a referral to the appropriate community agency. This includes linking the student to community resources such as job placement and other follow-up services (CDE, n.d.-a; USDE, n.d.).

In 1981, the California Department of Education (CDE) created a non-financial interagency agreement with both the Employment Development Department (EDD) and the State Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), known as WorkAbility I (WAI) to better prepare students with disabilities for a job. The WAI provides comprehensive pre employment skills training, employment placement and follow-up for high school students in special education who are making the transition from school to work, independent living, and postsecondary education or training. In coordination with local work placements, students are offered on-the-job subsidized or unsubsidized employment experience customized for their regional economic, social, and geographic needs as well as their individual abilities (CDE, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

**Transition Practices**

Two recent studies reviewed over 42,000 articles looking for evidence and research-based practices of existing and new predictors for postschool success for students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2020; Rowe et al., 2020). The study found new evidence supporting 14 existing predictors of postschool success, and identified three new predictors (Mazzotti et al., 2020). Some of the existing predictors, with new evidence in support of their success, include exit exam/high-school diploma status,

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inclusion in general education, paid employment/work experience, self-care/independent living skills, self-determination/self-advocacy, social skills, transition program and work study. They also found that goal setting, parent expectations, program of study, student support, and youth autonomy/decision-making were research-based predictors, and career and technical education are evidence-based predictors (Mazzotti et al., 2020). The predictors of career awareness, community experiences, interagency collaboration, occupational courses, parent involvement, and travel skills are still used but have not been proven to be evidenced based (Mazzotti et al., 2020). The new predictors they identified were psychological empowerment, self-realization, and technology skills. This rich list of practices, especially those with evidence, are the most current secondary transition predictors of postschool success.

Another study (Rowe et al., 2020) found support for nine evidence-based practices: Check & Connect to increase student engagement and IEP participation; EnvisionIT to teach technology skills; parent training to teach knowledge of transition services; Project SEARCH to teach vocational skills; Self-Advocacy Strategy to teach student involvement in the IEP; Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction to teach self-determination skills; Self-Directed IEP to teach self-determination skills and involvement in the IEP; Take Charge curriculum to teach self-determination skills; and Video modeling to teach food preparation and home maintenance skills. There were also twenty-two research-based practices recognized that do not or do not yet have evidence based status. They are Communicating Interagency Relationships and Collaborative Linkages for Exceptional Students (CIRCLES) to increase self-determination; Mentoring to increase STEM knowledge, engagement, and self-efficacy; Multimodal Anxiety and Social Skills Intervention (MASSI) to increase social skills and reduce anxiety; Peer assisted instruction/supports to teach social interactions; Person-centered planning to teach employment skills; Response prompting to teach grocery shopping skills; Self-

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determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) to teach on-task behavior; Simulation to teach basic finance skills; Student-Directed Transition Planning lesson package to teach self-determination skills; Whose Future Is It? Plus, Rocket Reader to teach self-determination skills; Working at Gaining Employment Skills to teach social and occupational skills; and video modeling to teach technology skills (Rowe et al., 2020).

Teaching self-advocacy skills during the middle and high school years is essential for an effective postsecondary transition. Student led IEPs, focused on self-determination, with the support of teachers, counselors, administrators and parents will help to promote confidence and establish critical strategies for success (Connor, 2012; Martin et al., 2006; Moore & McNaught, 2014). By the eighth-grade IEP, it is imperative that students have a thorough knowledge of their disability, complete with their strengths and weaknesses, along with the accommodations available after high school (Connor, 2012; Gil, 2007; Hamblet, 2014; Moore & McNaught, 2014; Rothman et al., 2008). Parent participation is also key by providing the family with information about future independence and the availability of auxiliary aids and assistive technology (Hamblet, 2014).

A visit to the college disability services office, by not only the student and their family but to include an IEP team representative, can clear up any questions about the postsecondary experience. They can analyze the student’s high school accommodations compared to those they may receive in college to determine if a reduction in services might be warranted. Other ways to establish realistic expectations about college could be to encourage the student to take a college class during high school or to meet with other students who have already made the transition. Ensuring that the student has the right types of testing must be completed to present for eligibility for services (Connor, 2012; Gil, 2007; Hamblet, 2014; Moore & McNaught, 2014; Rothman et al., 2008).

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Students who arrive at college, with a high level of confidence (self determination), understanding their disability and the accommodations they qualify for, with the correct test results, are set up for success (Skinner, 1998). They can then work with the disability services office to self-advocate and set up their accommodations while taking responsibility for their own education (Connor, 2012).

Once the student with disabilities is admitted to college, they do not automatically receive accommodations. Covered by Section 504 and the ADA, postsecondary institutions are not bound by IDEA. The difference between the disability laws and regulations in K-12 versus the postsecondary environment can be confusing and frustrating for the student who is not adequately prepared. Students must self-disclose to apply for services with the correct documentation or risk having to pay for additional testing to receive accommodations (Connor, 2012; Hamblet, 2014; Madaus & Shaw, 2006). Therefore, adequate and thorough preparation for the transition to postsecondary education is the key to success for student with disabilities. The events of 2020 may have made self-advocacy even more important and transition even more of a challenge for students with IEPs.

**COVID-19**

A major pandemic has only occurred twice over the last century, 1918 and 2020. In 1918, the Spanish Flu hit the United States and closed schools for varying amounts of time across the country. In 2020, COVID-19 closed schools across the United States for approximately 60 million students severing instruction and services for nearly a year

(Dorn et al., 2020; Golberstein et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). One major difference is that in 1918 schools were not required to provide services to students with disabilities. How to carry out instruction and provide legally required educational services to eligible students, K-12 and post-secondary, during a time of pandemic, is a

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new and thus sparsely researched topic in both educational and public administration decision-making.

**Changes in Teaching During COVID**

In March of 2020, COVID-19 arrived in California and changed the way students went to school (Golberstein et al., 2020). The entire K-12 system was faced with daunting challenges (Dibner et al., 2020). Responding to the pandemic led to schools closing across the country with no plan to ensure continuity of instruction or to determine when and how to reopen the schools (Dibner et al., 2020). The education system in the United States was created around a traditional schedule and was not ready for extended shutdowns. Teaching moved from face-to-face to online or distance education.

Distance learning, also called distance education, e-learning, or online learning, is a form of education which include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student student communication (Burke et al., 2019). Distance learning was historically used for remote and international learners. Distance learning includes both synchronous and asynchronous approaches to instruction. Synchronous instruction is live instruction involving audio and/or video engagement between an instructor and students. Asynchronous instruction utilizes pre-recorded video instruction completed within a set time (Frederick et al., 2020; Gao & Hill, 2020; Middleton, 2020). In both cases, printed materials or packets can be provided with verbal or written feedback using technology such as phones, Google Classroom, Zoom, Canvas, Microsoft Teams, and Seesaw (Frederick et al., 2020; Gao & Hill, 2020; Middleton, 2020), among others.

Even though the educational community has worked to promote online learning, teachers have indicated that they were not prepared for the rapid transition in 2020 (Dorn et al., 2020; Middleton, 2020). Traditionally, pedagogy preparation focuses on and

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districts primarily hire for face-to-face teaching. Teachers are provided professional development on the use of computers and other technologies for instruction, but the school closures have forced more districts to provide training on how to teach remotely (Gao & Hill, 2020). Although national standards for online teaching have been developed by the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) since 2006, the lack of standardization of distance instruction may have caused disparities when students returned face-to-face (Middleton, 2020)2.

**Effects of COVID-19 on California**

**students**

Local education agencies, school districts, and post-secondary institutions faced unexpected challenges as they prepared teachers/faculty, students, and families for distance learning (Frederick et al., 2020). This unearthed effects and issues that must be solved. In many communities, schools provide food security, mental health services, health clinics, and a variety of support networks (Dorn et al., 2020; Golberstein et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). In addition, students in poverty are more apt to have inadequate technology, study space, high-speed internet, or parental guidance (Dorn et al., 2020).

Academics were also affected. The delay in learning averaged approximately seven months with a widened gap in test scores for students in poverty and those with disabilities (Dorn et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Middleton, 2020). Although there is concern that such test scores could be evaluated at both the state and federal level (Johnson, 2021; Middleton, 2020), to date many states have suspended testing. This noted gap increased as teachers struggled to adapt their teaching to new formats; online, Zoom, synchronous and asynchronous (Middleton, 2020). The California Department of

2 At the time that this thesis was written during the COVID-19 pandemic there were few, if any, long-term studies yet showing the impact of distance learning on students.

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Education increased support to address these new challenges (Gao & Hill, 2020) during the pandemic. Funding, idea sharing, and resources were provided to further assist a variety of students with the delivery of new options for individualized education programs (IEPs) for those with disabilities (Gao & Hill, 2020).

**COVID-19 and Special Education in**

**California**

In California, over 700,000 students receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have faced unique challenges during COVID-19 (Gao & Hill, 2020). Over 90% of these students rely on critical, school-based services including one-on-one engagement with special educators and structured learning environments. A service need that is nearly double in low-income communities (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

The United States Department of Education Office (2020c) of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has issued a Q & A document concerning the implementation of IDEA with an understanding that the pandemic has changed some of the requirements including instruction and service delivery. OSEP concedes that during the pandemic, online options in place of face-to-face evaluation meetings to implement IDEA may be acceptable if they are done in a timely manner (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; USDE, 2020c); however, this is a challenge because students of varying abilities are vulnerable and are often susceptible to regression when their IEPs are modified (Dorn et al., 2020; Frederick et al., 2020). During COVID-19 there has been little consistency as these students have either been placed in the same class with general education students or are isolated from both peers and support networks which may intensify underlying behavioral health issues (Middleton, 2020; Wong, 2020). This can be exacerbated by the lack of resources and assistive technologies for online learning, especially in counties where poverty is high and broadband access is low or non-existent (Gao & Hill, 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley,

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2020). Advocating for students, with differing abilities, through strategies to improve research, planning, and the elimination of the educational disparities must be considered imperative as schools safely reintroduce this population into the classroom (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

**Post-Secondary Transition Issues**

**during COVID-19**

During COVID-19 students with disabilities who are transitioning from K-12 to post-secondary education are also facing obstacles as the online options, focusing on flexibility, are vague and can have a detrimental effect (Chugani & Houtrow, 2020; USDE, 2020a). One example showcases students who were receiving pre-employment transition services when the pandemic struck. Several of them graduated while they were still at home but were not allowed to finish their program because they were no longer in school (Diament, 2020b). This negative effect from the COVID-19 pandemic either limited or eliminated practice in an employment setting for many students. For those who were meeting the age maximum, it also likely affected their job seeking and job keeping success.

The post-secondary institutions, under the U.S. Department of Education Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, “have a long history of ensuring equality of opportunity for students with disabilities” as they transition to college (Charmatz 2020, p. 1). But even as these institutions work to follow the law, the uncertainty that arose during the pandemic made it clear that in future pandemic planning for higher education and employment, it is imperative to provide students with disabilities clear guidance for an equitable educational experience (Chugani & Houtrow, 2020; Diament, 2020a; USDE, 2020a).

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**Education Solutions during COVID**

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a damaging effect on students in the United States. Then U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos stated that she would not seek changes to the central tenets of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Instead, she recommended that lawmakers consider what the Department of Education called “additional flexibilities on administrative requirements” (as cited in Diament, 2020a, para. 2). However, DeVos said that her agency “is not requesting waiver authority for any of the core tenants of the IDEA or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, notably FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE)” (as cited in Diament, 2020a, para. 3). This flexibility manifested itself in a variety of ways across communities depending on geography, income, and influence. Unverified stories exemplify this phenomenon showcasing school districts across the state who have failed to conduct needed assessments, ignored requests for in-home assistance, denied needed assistive technology, disciplined students who could not comply with distance learning, and discriminated against students with disabilities in their reopening policies (Disability Rights California, n.d.).

As students, families, and teachers/faculty continue to persevere, several recurrent solutions have persisted. First, financial support for reliable access to technology and to promoting children’s mental health parity through telehealth (Golberstein et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). Support is needed in combination with the resources and in collaboration with community mental health agencies and with local school districts. Secondly, flexible staffing and innovative teaching methods while prioritizing which students need to be in person teaching in the classroom. This would include a focus on which activities would benefit students the most for instruction both in-classroom and remotely, with the most at-risk students in mind (Dorn, 2020). Training and guidelines in the recognition of warning signs, interventions, in-home assessment

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visits, and possible referrals to outside help is needed for school and community leaders (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Different types and ways for educators to conduct instruction and therapy, both online and over the phone, while continuing to look at the possibility of extending the school year (Gao & Hill, 2020).

The Association for Behavior Analysis International 2020 profiled an experimental program, created by the Santa Cruz City School District, that allowed students to receive the same accommodations and support that they had received on campus before COVID-19 (Frederick et al., 2020). The Distance Support Model, which started immediately after the shutdown, involved the selection of 24 students, each with an IEP, and at least one or more behavioral excesses. After 5 days of testing out the model at a clinical site, the interventionists were able to work remotely using secure digital platforms to provide at least 15 hours per week (3 hours per day) of individualized support, which was accessed by students, on their district provided Chromebook, iPad, or Kindles The preliminary success of the Distance Support Model gives hope that similar programs can be utilized to increase access to educational and behavioral supports for students, with IEPs, throughout California (Frederick et al., 2020).

Although it has been almost twenty years since the reauthorizations of IDEA (2004) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (2001) put a focus on providing increased support (scientifically based research) for students with disabilities in their transition from K-12 to post-secondary education, institutions are still struggling to implement proven practices. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2020c), 16% of students, with disabilities dropped out of high school in the 2017-18 school year. Additional data collected from the U.S. Department of Education’s series of National Longitudinal Transition Studies following students with disabilities during and after high school also found that students with disabilities do not keep pace with their counterparts without disabilities in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and

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independent living (Hamblet, 2014; Mazzotti et al., 2020). Gaps were also found between the two groups for both enrollment in higher education as well as the completion of college (Sanford et al., 2011). Only 29.4% of students with disabilities completed college versus 42.2% of those without disabilities (Hamblet, 2014; Sanford et al., 2011).

Some of these challenges can be attributed to the regulated structure offered with an IEP, during K-12, versus what the student with disabilities faces once they transition out of high school. These supports, which were mandated during K-12, are altered widely depending on the institution. The new environment can require more independence and be more demanding thus destabilizing for the student with disabilities. Compared to high school, college students, with or without disabilities, can become overwhelmed and experience anxiety with long lectures, exams, papers, and heavy reading requirements (Connor, 2012; Hamblet 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges for both the students with disabilities and their educators. Challenges stemmed from the transition to online learning and has created a myriad of problems including: a lack of appropriate teacher training, insufficient technology with high speed internet, isolation, apathy, slow government response, and detrimental timelines for students trying to transition to post secondary education. The cumulative effect of this pandemic has posed serious consequences to these students who are vulnerable and are often susceptible to regression when their IEPs are modified. The last time the United States was faced with this type of pandemic was in the early 1900s when the support of students with disabilities was not even a consideration.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Mazzotti et al. (2020) found that there are 14 existing predictors of postsecondary transition success and three new predictors. These predictors were used in my study in an attempt to determine which administrators are or are not supporting their staff and institutions by implementing research and evidence based practices in the transition process of students with ITPs to a postsecondary experience. To operationalize these predictors, the following study utilized a mixed methods approach that consisted of a survey and interviews. This survey took place via Zoom because it was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Study Design**

Prior to being interviewed, each of the participants completed a survey. The survey contained eleven questions utilizing a 5-point Likert scale to gauge respondents’ use of transition success policies. There were also eight open-ended questions focusing on K-12 policies and practices and seven focusing on postsecondary policies and practices. The full text of the survey and these questions appear in Appendix B.

**Sample**

Over 40 professionals with an impact on special education in K-12 and postsecondary were surveyed and interviewed. The participants were recruited via email from the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, large K-12 school districts, and regional community colleges and 4-year universities in the California Central San Joaquin Valley (see Appendix C for the email invitation and a full list of schools and institutions). The sample included 13 males and 27 females. Of the males, 8 work in K-12 systems and 5 work in postsecondary education. Of the females, 12 work in the K-12 system, 11 in postsecondary education, and 4 are experts. The sample included 13

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educators, administrators, and specialists within the K-12 system who work in the Clovis Unified and Fresno Unified School Districts, and at the office of the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools.

Clovis Unified School District (CUSD) is a mid-size, diverse district with a census day enrollment of 43,654 students for the 2019/2020 school year. The cumulative enrollment for students with disabilities was 11% (3,973). CUSD’s boundary covers 200- square-miles, and includes most of Clovis, California, 20% of Fresno, California, and a small portion of unincorporated Fresno County. In CUSD, there are 34 elementary schools, 5 intermediate schools, 5 high schools, 1 adult school, and 6 alternative education campuses (Clovis Unified School District, n.d.; CDE/EdSource/FCMAT, n.d.-a).

Several participants came from Fresno Unified School District (FUSD). The participants included teachers, middle managers, and administrators. FUSD’s Census Day enrollment for the 2019/2020 school year was 73,381 students. The cumulative enrollment for students with disabilities was 8% (9,354) students. There are 66 elementary schools, 15 middle schools, 9 high schools, 4 alternative schools, 3 special education schools, and 1 adult school in the FUSD (Bui, 2019; CDE/EdSource/FCMAT, n.d.-c; Data USA, n.d.-d.).

The sample also included specialists, middle managers, and administrators from Fresno County Superintendent of Schools (FCSS; CDE/EdSource/FCMAT. (n.d.-b). This office provides direct services to special education students in 35 of the 37 districts in Fresno County. They have dedicated staff to serve transition students ages 18 through 21. FCSS is also a SELPA. In the 2019/2020 school year, the Census Day enrollment for all of Fresno County was 207,858 students, and the cumulative enrollment was 214,187 students. The cumulative enrollment for students with disabilities was approximately 10% (22,974) of the students.

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To fully understand the transition process, participants from postsecondary education included: administrators, counselors, coordinators and specialists from Clovis Community College, Reedley College, and Fresno City College. In the 2019/2020 school year, Clovis Community College enrolled a total of 8,454 students, with 29% of those students studying full-time. In 2019, 1,786 students were awarded degrees, and 1,790 students completed college (Data USA, n.d.-b, n.d.-d).

Reedley College enrolled 11,296 students in the 2019/2020 school year, with 3,207 studying full-time, and 8,089 students studying part-time. In 2019, 1,872 students were awarded degrees, and 1,870 students completed college. (Data USA, n.d.-d, n.d.-g).

In the 2019/2020 school year, Fresno City College enrolled a total of 24,806 students of which 7,792 were full-time and 17,014 were part-time. In 2019, however, 2,875 degrees were awarded to students, and 2,860 students completed college (Data USA, n.d.-c, n.d.-d).

A third cluster of participants comprised administrators, coordinators and specialists from the University of California, Merced, California State University, Fresno, and Fresno Pacific University. In the 2019/2020 school year, University of California, Merced enrolled a total of 8,847 students. In 2019 1,560 were awarded meaning 66% of students graduated (Data USA, n.d.-f, n.d.-h).

California State University, Fresno enrolled a total of 24,298 students in the 2019/2020 school year, with 20,796 studying full-time, and 3,502 students studying part time. In 2019, 5,962 students were awarded degrees (Data USA, n.d.-a, n.d.-d).

In the 2019/2020 school year, Fresno Pacific University enrolled a total of 4,300 students, with 2,987 students studying full-time, and 1,313 students studying part-time. In 2019, 1,334 degrees were awarded, and 1,330 students completed college (Data USA, n.d.-d, n.d.-e).

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The sample also included four experts in the field of Special Education. They were an ADA Consultant, an author who focuses on special educational transitions a learning center administrator, and a government contracted consultant.

**Data Collection**

The survey had 19 questions for K-12 and 18 for postsecondary (Tables 1 & 2). Within these questions, the first 11 were quantitative and rated answers on a 5-point Likert scale. The remaining questions used were qualitative with open-ended responses. Each question was coded by the researcher as either, “Bureaucratic” or “Human Relations” and labeled individually to assess the administrative frameworks applied by practitioners (see Tables 1 & 2). These labels were determined after an assessment of the diction used in the questions that denote processes typically related to either the Bureaucratic (B) or Human Relations (HR) political frameworks. As indicated in an earlier reference to Max Weber, the Bureaucratic Management Theory is focused on the standardization of productivity, whereas the Human Relations Management Theory, developed by Elton Mayo, is focused on supporting people. An example of the B political framework can be seen with Question K15 (How do legal protections affect the postsecondary transition process). In this open-ended question the respondent is asked how frequently they use this strategy. Since K15 is about legal protections, it is both compliance and procedurally oriented in alignment with the Bureaucratic management theory. In contrast, Question K03 (students leading their own IEP meetings) reflects an HR political framework because it values the student voice and the parents’ input.

For both K-12 and postsecondary SPED professionals, the first 11 questions were answered using the 5-point Likert scale, followed by open-ended questions. The 5-point Likert scale ranged from 1 to 5 and captured how often the interviewees, or their designated institutions, employed strategies used in the transition of students with an IEP for K-12. It also measured how helpful these strategies were for post-secondary institutions.

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**Table 1**

*Management Type by Variable – K-12*

Questions for K-12 interviewees: I will be using the 5-point Likert Scale with: 1 2 3 4 5

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time All the time

I am going to give you a list of strategies used in the transition of students from K-12 to postsecondary and I would like you to please respond to how

**Code #**

frequently you or your institution uses them: Human Relations (HR) Bureaucratic (B)

**Type: HR/B**

K01 Visits to post-secondary/colleges HR K02 Teaching students about their needs/disability/abilities HR K03 Students leading their own IEP meetings HR K04 Experience with WorkAbility B

K05 Inclusive General Education courses in High School B K06 Factoring in Parent Expectations HR K07 Teaching specific/advanced technology skills B K08 Students using Goal Setting B K09 Teaching self-determination skills HR K10 Students sharing needed accommodations HR K11 Employment experience B How does your institution work with a student with an IEP in the transition to

K12

post-secondary education? B How does your institution work with the WorkAbility program to prepare K13

students for post-secondary life? B Please provide me with examples of how students in your district practice or K14

apply self-realization/self-determination as part of transition? HR

K15 How do legal protections affect the postsecondary transition process? B K16 What are some barriers with the transition to postsecondary work? HR How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the special education experience at

K17

your institution? Please include effects to that transition process. B How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the attitudes of SPED students K18

considering attending college or other post-secondary education? HR

K19 What age does your institution begin the transition process? B

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**Table 2**

*Management Type by Variable - PS*

Questions for Postsecondary interviewees: I will be using a 5-point Likert scale.

1 2 3 4 5

Not Minimally Neutral Helpful Very Helpful

I am going to give you a list of strategies used in the transition of students from

**Code #**

K-12 to postsecondary and I would like you to please respond to how helpful these strategies are in the transition to your institution:

**Type: HR/B**

PS01 Visits to post-secondary/colleges HR PS02 Teaching students about their needs/disability/abilities HR PS03 Students leading their own IEP meetings HR PS04 Experience with WorkAbility B

PS05 Inclusive General Education courses in High School B PS06 Factoring in Parent Expectations HR PS07 Teaching specific/advanced technology skills B PS08 Students using Goal Setting B PS09 Teaching self-determination skills HR PS10 Students sharing needed accommodations HR PS11 Employment experience B How does your institution work with students who had an IEP in HS as they

PS12 PS13

transition to your college/university? B Can you share any best practices you use to support students who are eligible for your services as they transition to your institution? HR

PS14 How do legal protections affect the transition process? B PS15 What are some barriers with this transition work? B Does your institution ask the student to share their Individualized Transition

PS16 PS17 PS18

Program (ITP)? Is it helpful? Why or Why not? B How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your services at your institution/college? B How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the accommodations offered to students at your institution/college? HR

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For K-12 institutions the answers were coded as follows: (1) indicated the strategy and question was never used by the participant or institution, (2) the transition strategy was rarely employed, (3) the approach was used sometimes, (4) the approach was used most of the time, and (5) the approach or strategy was used all of the time.

For post-secondary professionals, the responses were coded as follows: (1) the particular transition strategy was not helpful at all, (2) the approach was minimally helpful, (3) the strategy was neutral, (4) the approach was helpful in transition, and (5) the approach very helpful to the transition of SPED students.

According to Mazzotti et al. (2020), “when reviewing post school success there was new evidence supporting 14 predictors as well as three new predictors. The new predictors they identified were psychological empowerment, self-realization, and technology skills” (p. 5). Three of the Likert questions correspond to these new predictors: Question 2, Teaching students about their needs/disability/abilities, corresponds to psychological empowerment; Question 7, Teaching specific/advanced technology skills, corresponds to technology; and Question 9, Teaching self determination skills, corresponds to self-realization.

The open-ended questions were presented to the SPED professionals in both K-12 and post-secondary institutions. For K-12 professionals there were eight open-ended questions that gave the respondents an opportunity to elaborate on their transition strategies for IEP students (see questions K12-19 on Table 1). Question K12 poses how the professional’s institution works with an IEP student to transition them into post secondary education. Question K13 inquires how the participants' institution works with the WorkAbility program to ease students' transition into post-secondary programs. Question K14 inquired as to what specific behaviors that students displayed regarding self- realization and self-determination as part of their transition process. Question K15 asked what legal protections are in place that would affect the postsecondary transition

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process. Question K16 questioned whether there are barriers in place regarding the transition to postsecondary work. Question K17 asks how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the special education experience at each professional's specific institution and how the pandemic has affected the transition process. Question K18 asks if the COVID 19 pandemic has affected the attitudes of SPED students thinking of attending college or other post-secondary education. Question K19 asks about the age a student must be at the professional’s institution to begin the transition process. These responses to these questions allowed me to see some differences among K-12 respondents depending on their role of either practitioner or administrator during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There were seven open-ended questions for post-secondary individuals to further assess the transition process for SPED students at institutions of higher learning (see questions PS12-18 in Table 1). Question PS12 inquired as to how the interviewee’s institution works with students who have a preexisting IEP from high school to transition to their institution. Question PS13 asked the respondents to share their best practices in their role of supporting students who qualify for their SPED services transitioning into that institution. Question PS14 posed how legal protections affect the transition process for SPED students. Question PS15 asked what barriers exist in the transition process. Question PS16 asks if the participant’s institution asks SPED students to share their Individualized Transition Program (ITP), and whether sharing their ITP helpful. Question PS17 inquires as to how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the services at the respondent’s institution. Lastly, question PS18 asks how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the accommodations offered to students at their institution. Answers to these questions will provide insights into how those in postsecondary institutions understand and view their role in the transition process and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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**Procedure**

A total of 40 interviews were conducted including: 20 in K-12, 16 in postsecondary, and 4 with experts. The interviews were conducted with professionals who agreed to being interviewed after being recommended by key administrators in the area. They were informed their participation was voluntary and they were allowed to end the interview at any time or skip any questions they did not want to answer (see Appendix D for IRB approval and consent form). For example, the superintendents of the K-12 schools and presidents of the community colleges were very helpful in providing recommendations for those who should be interviewed, and in some cases offering introductions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

During the interview process, the responses were recorded on an individual Google Doc for each participant. I utilized the document as my primary recording device for the duration of the interview. At the beginning of each interview, the 5-point Likert scale was introduced, and I explained that the first 11 questions would be answered using a scale of 1 to 5 and remaining questions would be open-ended. Upon conclusion of the interview, I thanked the participants for their time and shared a link to an online SPED book with them to help both their students and their student’s parents with the transition process as a token of appreciation for their participation.

To protect the privacy of the interviewees, no names were used in the written analysis of the interviews and no identifiable individual opinions were included in presentations or published reports. All information in the analysis is reported as percentages, overall trends, or anonymous comments, and no individual responses include any personally identifying information.

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**Data Analysis**

**Quantitative**

For the initial set of analyses, the individual questions were the dependent variables, and the independent variables were *institution type* (coded 1=K-12, 2=postsecondary) and *educational position* (coded 0=field and 1=administration). *Educational position* codes, assigned to each interviewee, were based on their title and the level of the institution in which they worked. The mean and mode of individual questions were calculated across respondents and used in the analyses. The results are presented in Tables 2a and 2b in Chapter 4. Cross tabulations were created to compare counts and frequencies of responses to questions 2, 7, and 9 by educational position and by institution type, and two-sample T-tests were used to test for differences in mean responses by educational position and institution type. The results will also be presented in chapter 4.

The dependent variable used in the second set of analyses is the *political framework*, coded as Human Resources (HR) or Bureaucratic (B) method. A mean score, or composite score, for all HR-based questions and a mean score, or composite score, for B-based questions was calculated for each participant. Because it was hypothesized that community college affiliated participants’ responses to the HR and B questions would differ from the 4-year institutional affiliated participants, additional stratification of institution type into three categories, coded as 1=K-12, 2=community college, and 3=4- year university was done. We examined the relationship between political frameworks and the independent variables of institution type and educational position. Using the HR and B composite scores, paired t-tests were conducted to test for differences in responses to the HR and B questions within each educational position type and within each institution type. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) analyses were run to test for differences in HR versus B responses across educational position type and across

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institution type. A two-way ANOVA analysis was run to test for differences in HR versus B responses across institution type and educational position type together. All tests were performed at an α=0.05 significance level. Finally, box plots were created in order to visually represent the scores of HR versus B questions within K-12, CC, and 4-year institutions, and a clustered bar chart displayed the scores of HR versus B questions by educational position and institution type. All analyses and graphs were performed using the Google Sheets statistical functions and Stata 13.0. Results and graphs are presented in chapter 4. Stata output is available in Appendix E.

**Qualitative**

The information from the open-ended questions was analyzed as supportive data to the survey questions to provide a stronger analysis of educators’ decisions in the transition process. The qualitative information was transcribed from temporary recordings and organized on a spreadsheet. The answers for each question were analyzed for patterns, use of HR and B, and any alignment to research proven practices. The narrative data was also used to provide either reinforcing or contradictory evidence to the quantitative findings.

In addition, special attention was given to the answers regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there were little research questions about proven best practices, the answers were analyzed for any patterns, lessons learned, or exceptional statements.

**Summary**

Through the utilization of a mixed-methods survey with questions on a 5-point Likert scale, along with open-ended questions assessing the political framework of individual practitioners, this study examined the perspectives on the educator’s role in the transition of students receiving special education services from K-12 to postsecondary. Both qualitative and quantitative data were derived from interviews through Zoom with

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40 professional special educators from K-12, community colleges, 4-year universities, as well as experts in the field of special education.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS/OUTCOMES

This chapter will address the research questions: “Does a preferred policy framework of an administrator/teacher affect the transition of students with IDEA services in California, from K-12 to postsecondary education?” and “How have these processes been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic?” This study employed the use of a survey, including 11 questions which used a 5-point Likert scale to collect responses, as well as a series of open-ended questions; eight additional questions were asked of respondents working in K-12 education, and seven additional open-ended questions were asked of respondents working in a post-secondary setting. As a reminder, the independent variables for this study are the type of institutions: K-12, community college (CC), and 4- year university (4-year) as well as educational position (field, administrative) of the respondent. The dependent variables are the individual questions in the first set of analysis (Likert questions) and the political framework method (Human Relations (HR) or Bureaucratic (B)) in the second set of analyses (political framework analysis).

**Quantitative Analysis**

**Likert Questions**

In analyzing the Likert questions from the survey, I used descriptive statistics to take a first glance at the data. My goal was to find where there might be meaningful differences or similarities between the respondents of both the K-12 and postsecondary institutions. For the first set of analysis, I calculated the mean and mode for each of the Likert questions by institution type: 1=K-12 and 2=Postsecondary (PS) (Table 3a and 3b). What I found was that among the K-12 respondents (Table 3a), the questions about the self-identification of a student’s needs/abilities/disabilities (K02) and factoring in parent expectations (K06) were rated the highest with means ≥ 4.00 and modes = 5,

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indicating that these strategies were more frequently employed compared to the other strategies. The question about students leading their own IEP meetings (K03) had the lowest rating with mean = 2.45 and mode = 2, indicating that this strategy was less often employed. Conversely, among the postsecondary respondents (Table 3b), the same question about the student’s self-identification of needs/abilities/disabilities (PS02) and the question about self-determination (PS09) were rated the highest with means > 4.50 and modes = 5, indicating that these strategies were most helpful, while questions about experience with WorkAbility (PS04) and employment experience (PS11) were rated the lowest with means < 4.00 and modes = 3.

**Table 3a**

*K-12 Likert Questions*

**No. Question Mean Mode** K01 Visits to post-secondary/colleges 2.95 3 K02 Needs/Abilities/Disabilities 4.00 5 K03 Students leading their own IEP meetings 2.45 2 K04 Experience with WorkAbility 3.70 4 K05 Inclusive General Education courses in High School 3.65 3 K06 Factoring in Parent Expectations 4.10 5 K07 Technology Skills 2.90 4 K08 Students using Goal Setting 3.65 3 K09 Teaching Self-Determination 3.70 3 K10 Students sharing needed accommodations 3.25 4 K11 Employment experience 3.30 3

When comparing the responses from K-12 participants with postsecondary respondents, postsecondary respondents rated all but two of the strategies as helpful or

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very helpful to the transition of SPED students, with means above 4 and modes of 4 or 5. Responses by K-12 respondents also indicated that most strategies were either used sometimes or most of the time, with means and modes between 3 and 4.

**Table 3b**

*Postsecondary Likert Questions*

**No. Question Mean Mode** PS01 Visits to post-secondary/colleges 4.25 4 PS02 Needs/Abilities/Disabilities 4.56 5 PS03 Students leading their own IEP meetings 4.19 5 PS04 Experience with WorkAbility 3.69 3 PS05 Inclusive General Education courses in High School 4.44 5 PS06 Factoring in Parent Expectations 4.00 4 PS07 Technology Skills 4.50 5 PS08 Students using Goal Setting 4.38 5 PS09 Teaching Self-Determination 4.69 5 PS10 Students sharing needed accommodations 4.44 5 PS11 Employment experience 3.31 3

Three of the Likert questions represented the three new predictors of postsecondary institution success identified by Mazzotti et al. Using the means and modes of these questions, I explored the association of these predictors by institution type. Results of the cross tabulations and t-tests are presented in Table 4.

When asked if they teach their students about their needs/disability/abilities (Q2), most respondents said they always use this approach 45% for K-12 respondents and 75% for PS. The difference in the mean responses between K-12 (4.00) and post-secondary (4.56) was not significant (t=-1.73, p=0.093).

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**Table 4**

*Frequencies for Predictors of Postsecondary Success by Institution Type*

**Q2: Needs/Abilities/ Disabilities**

**Q7: Technology Skills**

**Q9: Self**

**Determination**

**Approach/Strategy K-12 PS K-12 PS K-12 PS**

1 = Never used/

Not helpful

2 = Rarely used/ Minimally helpful 3 = Sometimes used/ Neutral

4 = Mostly used/ Helpful

5 = Always used/ Very helpful

0%

(0)

10% (2)

25% (5)

20% (4)

45% (9)

0%

(0)

0%

(0)

18.8% (3)

6.3% (1)

75%

(12)

15% (3)

25% (5)

25% (5)

25% (5)

10% (2)

0%

(0)

0%

(0)

12.5% (2)

25%

(4)

62.5% (10)

0%

(0)

10% (2)

40% (8)

20% (4)

30% (6)

0%

(0)

0%

(0)

0%

(0)

31.3% (5)

68.8% (11)

Mean 4.00 4.56 2.90 4.50 3.70 4.67 T-test t=-1.73 t=-4.52\*\*\* t=-3.53\*\*\* Note: \*=p<.05, \*\*=p<.01, \*\*\*=p<.001

When asked if teaching specific or advanced technology skills (Q7) was helpful for transition, there was no clear pattern in the responses from those in K-12, as they were fairly evenly distributed among rarely, sometimes, and mostly using this approach, while 62.5% the PS respondents reported that they always use this approach. The difference in the mean responses between K-12 (2.90) and post-secondary (4.50) was significantly different (t=-4.52, p<0.001).

Finally, when asked about teaching self-determination skills (Q9), most (40%) of the K-12 respondents reported that they sometimes use this approach, while an overwhelming majority (68.8%) of post-secondary respondents report that they always use this approach. The difference in the mean responses for were again significantly

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different (t=-3.53, p=0.001) with a mean of 3.70 for K-12 respondents and a mean of 4.69 for post-secondary respondents.

These data clearly indicate that the postsecondary respondents find these three skills critical, important with high mean scores and all responses above 2. Compared to the K-12 mean responses, the postsecondary mean responses to the use of technology and self-determination were statistically significantly higher. Thus, the postsecondary respondents thought these “best practices” techniques were very important for student transition although the K-12 respondents employed these techniques only sometimes on average. (Please note there are mixed programs responding to these questions.) Both sets of respondents agreed that a student’s self-awareness of their needs/abilities/disabilities was not only important but that this strategy was actively taught.

**Political Framework Analysis**

For each respondent, composite scores were calculated from the Human Relations (HR) and Bureaucratic (B) questions. Figure 1 presents a boxplot showing the mean composite scores for the HR and B questions. A paired t-test for determining if a difference existed between the mean composite scores for HR versus B questions yielded a p-value of 0.318, indicating no difference in mean responses for HR questions compared to B questions among all respondents. Basically, everyone was grouped together in this analysis, and no factors such as institution or education position were considered. This very broad grouping shows no difference between responses to the HR and B questions. When all responses were examined, at all levels, respondents used both approaches almost equally.

Even though there is no difference overall between the scores for HR versus B questions there could be differences by institution type as I hypothesized, or by educational position. Figure 2 shows boxplots of the mean composite scores for HR

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**Figure 1**

*Boxplot of Human Resources versus Bureaucratic Frameworks*

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questions and B questions stratified by educational position. Paired t-tests were employed to test the mean difference between HR and B approaches in each group. For Field positions, the t-test statistic of 0.178 was not significant, with p=0.860, indicating there was no statistical difference between the mean scores for HR questions compared to B questions. Similarly, for Administrative positions, the t-test statistic of 1.61 was not significant (p=0.131), indicating there was no difference between mean scores for HR questions compared to B questions.

The boxplots in Figure 2 give a visual representation of how the HR and B scores are distributed by education position and can provide some insight into the scores even though the means are not statistically different. When reviewing a boxplot it is important to remember that the top bar is the maximum observation with the top of the box at the 75% percentile and the bottom at 25%. The line in the middle is the median with the

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bottom bar providing the minimum observation. With this said, the plots show that the median scores for the respondents in the Field positions were generally lower than the median scores for respondents in the Administrative positions, both for the HR questions and the B questions. Within the Administrative positions, the scores for the HR questions appear to be generally higher than the scores for the B questions, although we know they aren’t statistically different. Of interest, there is an outlier among the HR scores that appears to fall below the B scores. Looking at the Field positions scores, the responses to the HR questions are more spread out than the responses to the B questions. One could surmise there is more agreement on how often the B approaches are used than how often the HR approaches are used among those in K=12 institutions, or more agreement on how helpful the B approaches are for transition than how helpful the HR approaches are.

**Figure 2**

*Boxplots of Human Resources versus Bureaucratic Frameworks by Position*

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When t-tests were run on responses between the HR and B questions by institution type, here further stratified into three levels (1=K-12, 2=community college, and 3=4-year university) for these analyses, there were no significant differences for either K-12 or community colleges (p=0.823 for K-12, p=0.898 for community college). However, there was a significant difference for 4-year universities indicating a preference for an HR method rather than a B method (p=0.036). Figure 3 shows the boxplots of the mean composite scores for HR questions and B questions stratified by institution type. In the figure, the difference between the HR and B scores for 4-year universities can be visualized. Since K-12 has to comply with IDEA this finding is not surprising and actually falls in line with my hypothesis indicating that that the HR political framework lends itself to the use of some of the documented best practices.

**Figure 3**

*Boxplots of Human Resources versus Bureaucratic Frameworks by Institution Type*

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Upon examining the qualitative questions, I was able to observe an interesting phenomenon. K-12 respondents answered in a way that indicated that they were clearly considering legal compliance and are depending on the school district and their position in meeting some of the laws. For postsecondary it is not the law that they must enforce, but it is a case of encouraging support of self-determination and self-advocacy. Once again, position refers to whether the respondent is an administrative or a field position. Upon examination of respondents’ use of the HR or B framework, no significant difference was found for those in the field versus those in administrative positions.

In the above analyses, the differences between the composite scores for the HR and B were explored within each education position and within each institution type. Now, we want to examine the differences in HR and B responses across positions and across institution types. A one-way ANOVA of HR and B responses by the field position respondents with the difference between HR and B responses by the administrative position respondents. The results of the one-way ANOVA showed that there was no difference between those in the field positions and those in administrative positions when it came to using a HR versus a B approach (p=0.344). A one-way ANOVA of HR and B responses across institution types was also employed to compare the difference in HR and B responses between the K-12, community college, and 4-year universities. The results of the ANOVA indicated there were no differences between the three types of institutions when it came to using HR versus B (p=0.101). When a regression model including the difference in HR and B responses with institution type was run, a significant difference appeared for the 4-year university compared to the K-12 institutions. The difference in HR and B responses was greater in the 4-year university respondents than the difference in the HR and B responses in the K-12 respondents (p=0.036). This can be seen in Figure 3 where the blue boxplot of HR scores is higher than the green boxplot of B scores for the 4-year university respondents. In contrast, there

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isn’t much difference between the blue boxplot of HR scores and the green boxplot of B scores for the K-12 respondents. Thus, our analyses by institution type show that the 4- year respondents prefer an HR method rather than a B method, and that the preference in HR is greater than the very slight preference (i.e. difference in mean HR and B scores) that the K-12 respondents have for the B method.

In a two-way ANOVA it is possible to look at the association between more than two variables. For example, we can look at the difference between HR scores and the B scores across educational position and institution type jointly. When employing the two way ANOVA of the difference of HR scores and B scores by education position and institution type, there were no significant differences across institutions and positions (p=0.169). Thus when 6 groups were formed by stratifying by educational positions and institution type, no group preferred either the HR or B method any more than another group as can be visualized in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Clustered Bar Chart of Means of Human Resources versus Bureaucratic Frameworks by Position and Institution Type*

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**Qualitative Analysis**

**Analysis of Open-Ended Questions**

Responses to the open-ended questions netted some surprising findings such as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of procedural knowledge of SPED professionals, and the support available for SPED students. According to the respondents, the pandemic had a deficit effect on the graduation rates of SPED students and the general student population as presented in chapter 3. The responses also indicate that there is a difference among SPED professionals about best practices in the field. This carried over into the different hands-on approach of SPED professionals at community colleges versus the hands-off approach at the higher-level institutions. Additionally, we observed a variance in the range of student support in terms of their self-advocacy and self-determination.

In response to the question “How does your institution work with a student with an IEP in the transition to postsecondary education?” (K12), the term “transition” was interpreted in two different ways. For some, it was interpreted as referring to the transition from high school into an adult day class, WorkAbility, and vocational programs. For others, this term was used to refer to the transition to both community college and 4-year universities. One K-12 respondent said that all students begin transitional planning when they enter high school. In fact, the respondent said, “protocol was set in place so students had time embedded in their classes to work on their individual plan, including looking at some of the steps to apply for eligibility for specific areas of employment.” Another K-12 respondent stated, “We have a system based on IDEA, based on the transition plan, job place experience, workplace readiness and self advocacy.” A third K-12 respondent said, “We believe in the collaboration of both the sending and receiving teams. For example, in the Adult Transition Program (ATP) with the linkages with the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) ...students are running the IEP

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with their goals.” These responses indicate that there is a real need for sequencing transitional programs from the beginning to the completion of the IEP. When asked “How does your institution work with students who had an IEP in high school as they transition to your college/university?” (PS12), the post-secondary responses varied. Most of the respondents discussed the campus disability center and the need for self-advocacy and self-disclosure by the student. “Our office of disabilities, or our counselors, assist the student in determining and explaining to faculty what accommodations they need to provide,” explained one respondent. “All of the responsibilities fall on the student. They must reach out to us with documentation. We immediately discuss the differences [in parental involvement and students’ advocacy] and the role that the parents play in this transition” another respondent explained. Overall, there was no uniform perspective or practice among post-secondary respondents. One respondent explained how it works at his college, “For high school seniors who transition to our college, we go out in the fall and meet with the students to assist them in applying for our Disabled Students Programs & Services (DSPS) intake in the spring. I help them with registration and financial aid, and share [information about] resources available to them. I follow up with them from their senior year in high school until they start their first semester in college. Then, during their first semester, I help them with their accommodations and make sure that they are communicating with their instructors. I transfer them to one of our three groups: general caseload, WorkAbility, or the DSPS Student Support Services (SSS) of a 4-year University.”

WorkAbility is one of the transitional programs with a focus in one question, “How does your institution work with the WorkAbility program to prepare students for post-secondary life?” (K13). Although the answers varied, one K-12 respondent explained, “There is a partnership with the local WorkAbility program once the students turn 16. This program finds temporary job placement for each student based on their

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transitional goal interest.” Another K-12 respondent stated, “We really do maximize this program to expose students to different choices. We use software to match them up with their interests and use WorkAbility to pay students for their job and to pay staff to work

with them. We wish there were more funds in this program to reach out to more students.” One school district has all five of their high schools connected to the WorkAbility program, while another uses a referral process for students in the mild to moderate setting only. One K-12 respondent expressed that they were frustrated with their District’s lack of participation, “Only one or two students participate...it could be so much more and it doesn’t feel like we are developing it to its full potential.” One respondent explained how the COVID-19 pandemic has really affected their participation, “This is the first year that we are not doing an adult transition workshop for families where I bring in programs like WorkAbility,” she said. This speaks directly to the COVID-19 impact. There was not personal contact in valuable growth programs. Again, HR supports the student with more personalization and goal setting.

In public administration and education, the idea of best practices is pervasive and often guides policy and decision making. When asked, “Can you share any best practices you use to support students who are eligible for your services as they transition to your institution?” (PS13) responses ranged from “I don’t know” to very specific practices. One respondent went into detail, “Preferential seating, small groups, cooperative learning structures and all accommodations based on individual needs such as: alternative text, additional time and shared presentation notes. There are also opportunities to respond to incorporate as much Universal Design for Living (UDL) as possible, including visual support and access to materials and positive reinforcement.” Other best practices include: a team who advocates for students as they transition onto campus while connecting to services; community outreach during high school College Night; working with the Central Valley Regional Center (CVRC) on life skills in a dorm setting; really listening to

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the needs of the students in order to make them feel included and supported; staying in contact with the students during their transition to college, whether face-to-face or via Zoom, so they feel connected, engaged, and they know who to talk to if they ever need

assistance. Other respondents discussed teaching the students self-advocating as their best practices. One respondent stated, “Providing strategies and transformative practices in advocating for themselves and knowing campus resources that apply to them specifically”, and another discussed, “promoting the idea that the student is driving their life and not just a passenger.” This is big indicator of the need for the HR approach and supports my theory that students need guidance to flourish. This in addition to implementation of the most current, evidence-based, secondary transition predictors of postschool success: psychological empowerment, self-realization, and technology skills (Mazzotti et al., 2020).

One of the three new predictors of post school success was self-realization (Mazzotti et al., 2020). To determine the extent to which this was put into practice, I asked respondents to “Please provide me with examples of how students in your district practice or apply self-realization/self-determination as part of transition” (K14). Respondents addresses this question with two different approaches. One K-12 respondent explained the K-12 perspective as follows, “As part of the transition experience, we put students in situations where they are challenged to work through the struggle to learn determination and perseverance.” A K-12 respondent from a different district added, “In general education, we practice how to ask for accommodations...as well as working on life skills to ask for what they need outside of the classroom.” An interest inventory of coursework and vocational interests was also mentioned to help students identify areas of strength or weakness. “Those who can speak for themselves are telling us and the Central Valley Regional Center (CVRC) workers what they want to do when they leave us,” explained one K-12 respondent. Another said that she focuses on the parents to make sure

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that they are completely aware of the self-advocacy that is required once their child turns 18. Finally, there were two programs where they did not feel like they had adequate training, and more work could be done to fully equip their students to advocate for themselves in the future. This is another example of the need for a more uniform HR approach in K-12.

When asked, “How do legal protections affect the transition process,” (PS14) responses varied from “the laws ensuring that protocols are being followed” to “the laws making it difficult for students to receive the accommodations that they need.” Many post-secondary respondents discussed the differences between K-12’s IDEA and Section 504 and ADA in postsecondary. One person stated, “Students and parents are coming in with an expectation that we are going to repeat the K-12 experience,” while another said, “Two very distinct legalities. K-12 IDEA versus 504 and ADA at the postsecondary level. IDEA is supported by the IEP and very accommodating. Whereas, in college, they must meet the rigor and may not make it...In college, the rigor is not reduced and the course outcome cannot be legally altered...Taking care of parents is an ongoing process and a fine line.” Most post-secondary respondents claim that the difficulty with many laws is having to help the parents and students to understand that the parents do not have a legal right to intervene under FERPA and HIPAA laws. In many cases, the students are used to relying on the parents’ interventions and are unaware of how to request accommodations on their own. Postsecondary schools are not legally allowed to assist the students unless the students say that they need assistance.

Question K15 (“How do legal protections affect the postsecondary transition process?”) offered a variety of responses. The K-12 focus was exemplified by one of the respondents, “Legally we are obligated to service our students until they receive a high school diploma, or until they turn 22. We have a legal obligation to provide them with the widest array of options in the workforce, and to visit” ...local colleges or other post-

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secondary institutions. “My entire job is affected by IDEA” explained another K-12 respondent. Other responses discussed increased confidentiality and how parent advocacy is greatly affected after age 18. One K-12 respondent continued, “Many parents are unaware that when their child turns 18, or finishes high school, they no longer legally have access to records or to make decisions for them. In parent-friendly language, they need to understand that the parents do not have a say in their child’s life after 18 without a conservatorship or a power of attorney.” Finally, one K-12 respondent confessed that they are “trying to determine the appropriate level of autonomy for this difficult topic.”

In review of PS15 (“What are some barriers with this transition work?”), post - secondary responses were very similar. Major barriers were: miscommunication between the high schools and the postsecondary colleges in terms of documentations and information; students needing to advocate for themselves; lack of parent understanding the FERPA and HIPAA laws; failure to acknowledge institutional roles and the expectations between postsecondary education and K-12; online versus face-to-face meetings; no access to the 504 or IEP plan; and a primary lack of student and parent preparation for college life. To quote one educator, “I think that the involvement of the parents was so much in K-12, but it is a difficult transition for them to wean them off… The students will, many times, go without accommodations because they assume this will happen, and it doesn’t.”

Barriers were the topic for question K16 (“What are some barriers with the transition to postsecondary work?”). The most frequently mentioned were: Ableism, lack of professional training and resources; recognizing the students’ potential and meeting student, parent, and staff expectations; conserved students who chose not to participate; a misunderstanding by general education teachers about inclusion and the role of the SPED professional; lack of preparation time; transportation; the balance between autonomy and independence; and public perception that a SPED perspective student cannot do the work.

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One K-12 respondent lamented, “Core academics, there is too much to work on. We need a transition class for transition planning.”

When we looked at the PS16 (“Does your institution ask the student to share their Individualized Transition Program (ITP)? Is it helpful? Why or Why not?”) many of the postsecondary respondents claim that they don’t work with ITPs; they do not know whether their institutions ask for students’ ITPs; they have never seen an ITP; or they only use IEPs or 504 plans. One specific PS respondent stated, “We create transition plans within our program, so we do not use them. We work with the student on their transition plan and goal setting for their next step, so that it is a successful transition to live outside of their parents’ home.” A second PS respondent said, “We do have a program called College to Career out of the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR). With that program, we have a counselor who works with students using the ITP, and it is very helpful. Not every school has a DOR counselor assigned to them. We are very fortunate.” PS16 responses demonstrate the wide and differing range of working with SPED students.

Both questions K17 and K18 addressed the COVID-19 pandemic. With question K17 (“How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the special education experience at your institution? Please include effects to that transition process.”). Answers varied dramatically, and demonstrated success, frustration, and fear for students including: students are gaining invaluable skills; all hands-on experiences were cancelled; teachers are struggling; families are struggling with behavioral problems at home; normal processes are interrupted because the family is doing the professional’s work; assessment has been a challenge; students with disabilities are not getting what they need; and it is more difficult for students and families to make informed decisions because they cannot tour the program or college first-hand. One K-12 respondent put it succinctly, “It (COVID) has affected everything….how they learn, the attendance rate has gone down as

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students are not participating as they did previously, and the transition opportunities are greatly affected. Many of our students on diploma track, who transition to Adult School for a fifth year did not make it.” However, another K-12 respondent saw the benefit in this experience, “The biggest shift is the virtual platforms and communication with families and the partnership with all of the players. I was very concerned in the beginning, but it has been wonderful.”

Mixed responses to question PS17 continued at the post-secondary level. One respondent illustrated two opposite reactions by saying, “With online courses, it has opened the door for some students who would have otherwise not been able to attend. On the opposite side, some of our students have had great difficulty navigating online courses and have not been successful because they need or want that in-person interaction with instructors and peers.” The majority of PS17 respondents claim that the transition to online teaching and services has been a major challenge for everyone. Teachers had to learn to teach online; students had to make sure they had quiet places to do their online studies; some students did not have proper access to the internet; meetings became online resulting in healthy meetings but without needed personal contact. A second respondent also mentioned the positive and negative aspects of the pandemic, “There is regression, and the amount of growth has been limited since they are at home. The positive is the students have become more technologically savvy.” All responses fully demonstrate the contrasting feelings about the COVID-19 pandemic and education.

Question K18 (“How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the attitudes of SPED students considering attending college or other post-secondary education?”) continued the COVID-19 conversation. Respondents focused on the idea that students missed the in-person aspect of school. However, students who were able to work within this virtual system thrived with their new perspective about technology and their ability to use it in the future. One K-12 respondent's concern was, “The social-emotional development,

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regardless of their abilities, has been affected, and the support they are used to is not possible.” Another expressed concern about the 20% drop-in graduation rates among the students under IDEA, “As a whole system we have a lot of work to do...to help our students catch up.” Finally, another K-12 respondent put it in perspective, “I think it has narrowed the world view of everyone by forcing people to stay home and stay online. With this reduced socialization things are far narrower in scope and this is not good for the mental health and prospects for these students, under IDEA, who are homebound.” Therefore, there are mixed and opposing points of view about the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic on SPED students within the K12 discipline.

The post-secondary responses to PS18 (“How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the accommodations offered to students at your institution/college?”) most often indicated that the transition to online platforms affected the way accommodations are offered. The focus one PS respondent stated, “Students with chronic illness are now able to participate more than they were previously. They can also record the class.” Another said, “The students at the college are not getting the in-person services that we are able to provide. It has been confusing and difficult for both the students and the instructors, but now the instructors can implement accommodations on their end with Canvas, provided that the students self-advocate.” A third respondent said, “Those who learn by touching have greatly been impacted. Some of these have fallen through the cracks.” Another PS respondent said, “They have to advocate more for themselves. They had to connect with their instructors. We had to work with a brand-new system to provide documentation to email to the instructors. The students must follow up on the requested accommodations. They are more involved than they were before.” Another said, “Coaching supports have been virtual and have seen a reduction. When a student is stuck, they are not coming to us, but, instead, they are going to their parents. This is causing regression.” A final respondent said, “Our students are still able to use the services, but they do not have full

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knowledge of the accommodations available...Having them back in their family home really has been difficult. Utilizing technology exclusively has been a new and exhausting experience.” In summary to this question at the post-secondary level, there is no single line of responses. Instead, it demonstrates positives in student learning methods versus predominant negatives in services and focus.

Finally, question K19 (“What age does your institution begin the transition process?”) brought out a final idea from K-12 professionals. Most of the respondents said, “before they turn 16 or at age 15.” But others had some varying responses including one that said age three, “We start talking to them from the moment that they qualify for SPED.”

In conclusion, after a survey of forty professionals and experts from K-12, CC, 4- year institutions, during the COVID-19 pandemic the results supported my hypothesis. When administrators use research and evidence-based practices that are known to predict secondary transition success for students with disabilities, they are primarily working through the HR policy framework. If they use this humanistic model that has been shown to promote success, the students have an improved service and are better prepared for post-secondary success. Further, the theoretical framework being used makes a difference in approach since the B model has been primarily utilized in the compliance environment for special education. Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, special education and the ITP have been greatly affected because of a lack of access to postsecondary transition resources.

A transition to the HR model could take several forms including transition to CC first with a more hands-on approach. Teaching students about the services provides in postsecondary institutions, while they are in high school to better prepare them. Better communication, both culturally and linguistically, to both students and parents about what to expect once IDEA expires, and how to use these services is essential.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION/SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

“Does a preferred policy framework of an administrator/teacher affect the transition of students, with IDEA services in California, from K-12 to postsecondary education, through the knowledge and application of researched based practices in ITPs?” Secondly, “How have these processes been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic?” This study found a small effect of a preferred policy framework and the quantifiable data showed the transition processes have been affected in several specific ways due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study used both survey and interview responses of education professionals in Special Education (SPED) and Disabled Students Services. The purpose was to examine their perspectives about the role public administrators and educators’ play as special education students K-12 transition into postsecondary (PS) education in the Central San Joaquin Valley. The survey included both open and closed ended questions to create a picture of approaches in preparing students for post-secondary education. Secondly, an assessment of the administrative approach, whether bureaucratic or human resource, was used by educators in their work. The study accounted for the type of institution the respondent worked in, K-12, community college (CC), or 4-year university (4-year). Also, the educational position of the respondent was considered, as to whether they worked in the field with students or were in an administrative position, slightly more removed from students. My research motivation was my interest in which administrative approach the institutions use when preparing students for and aiding them during transition. So, my dependent variable is an interest in the *political framework* of either the Human Relations (HR) or Bureaucratic (B) methods.

Based on personal experience supporting my son with co-morbidities the path to his postsecondary education was full of challenges. I hypothesized that when

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administrators/educators use research and evidence-based practices that are known to predict secondary transition success for students with disabilities if they are primarily working through the human resources policy framework. The humanistic model has been shown to promote success and the students, according to model supporters, have a better chance to succeed under this model. The bureaucratic model is a more traditional and often values compliance over quality of success of services. Finally, during the COVID 19 pandemic special education and the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) have been greatly affected due to a lack of access to support services, and, most importantly, face to-face instruction and interactions for postsecondary transition support and resources have been limited.

**Discussion of Findings**

As was shown in chapter 4, this study netted some surprising findings, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the (varying) level of knowledge of professionals in special education, and the differences in the amount support available for students who require special education services. Respondents shared that the pandemic influenced the graduation rates of SPED students, even the general student population. There was a difference in knowledge among SPED professionals of the best practices in the field, with some respondents more familiar with the evidence-based work while others where following a more B model of compliance. This was shared in the qualitative narrative as they self-revealed this information through the open-ended responses. There were differences including professional development needs etc. This difference in knowledge of policies and requirements carried over into the different hands-on approaches of SPED professionals at community colleges versus the hands-off approach at the 4-year institutions. A variance in the range of student support, in terms of their self-advocacy and self-determination was found.

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Respondents in both K-12 and postsecondary institutions reported that teaching students about their needs, disabilities, and abilities is a strategy they almost always use. In K-12, factoring parental expectations also ranked as a strategy that was frequently employed, while students leading their own IEP meetings was among the least used. For postsecondary respondents, teaching self-determination skills was rated very high while the two questions related to student work experience were rated the lowest.

When examining the association of the three new predictors of postsecondary institution success (Mazzotti et al., 2020), teaching students about their needs/disability/abilities is where there was the greatest disparity between K-12 and postsecondary respondents. Fewer than half (45%) of K-12 respondents report that this was a primary focus, while 75% of those in postsecondary education said they almost always do this. K-12 and postsecondary respondents were similar in how much emphasis they put on teaching specific or advanced technology skills and in teaching self determination skills. All three of these new predictors are utilized in both K-12 and postsecondary, but there are differences in the amount of emphasis and importance placed on them. These differences could be crucial to influencing the likelihood of a successful transition into higher education. Through these evidence-based practices students would be better equipped and prepared for their postsecondary transition.

The administrative framework of using human resources versus bureaucratic techniques was also examined in this study, as were responses based on the position of the respondent. The results showed that there was no differences based on the position of the respondent (administrator vs. in field), nor were there any significant differences between K-12 and community college practices or approaches to preparation for transition. However, there was a significant difference for 4-year universities, indicating a preference for a human resources-based approach rather than a bureaucratic approach. This is an interesting finding, as those in 4-year institutions indicated they used a more

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hands-off approach in practice during interviews, but then rated highly the humanistic, human resource-based approach.

When analyzing the barriers to the transition of students from K-12 to postsecondary there was a recurring theme of students who were unprepared to self advocate and parents unwilling to let them go. For students who do transition to college, there appears to be varying levels of support and ‘best practices’ within the transition. There also appears to be a struggle to differentiate between the services offered under IDEA and those offered under ADA and Section 504 in higher education. Students who have relied on the support under IDEA, and parents who are used to being able to support them, are often frustrated with the FERPA and HIPAA laws in place in colleges that define their children as legal, autonomous adults. They indicated what students and parents alike don’t understand is, as soon as the students transition to college, it becomes a legal issue for the colleges to reveal any information to the parents without a student consent form. Consequently, if students remain silent and do not ask for accommodations, the parents cannot legally become involved without proper consent from the student. Survey respondents reported that this happens with new students trying to avoid services or self-disclosure, often until they do not complete their education because they have lost their path.

The community college respondents consistently noted outreach as a main component when discussing support services in the transition from high school. Many of their programs follow the students from the 12th grade through their second year in college. Although community colleges are under ADA requirements, these services were established through the community colleges’ value system and their strong relationships with feeder districts. The students’ success is their focus.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment where students are expected to advocate for themselves. There is no on-campus support or

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professional one-on-one help. A majority of those interviewed stated that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected students who receive special education services systemically, as there were no in-person services and no in-person instruction. Community-based learning, Workability, and other adult education programs essentially ceased to function during this time. It was also more difficult for the instructors because students lacked access, would shut down or did not participate, thereby losing important instruction and services, often leaving them relying exclusively on family support. However, some students were able to gain an online distance learning experience by using the resources they had at home to learn remotely. One possible benefit of the distance learning was that this new remote learning also gave parents a firsthand look at the challenges in educating their students both in and out of the classroom. The COVID 19 pandemic essentially taught special education students to be more independent learners, which was not universally successful. In general, the positive comments about the pandemic were mostly about small, niche populations, though the K-12 respondents primarily indicated there would be negative and long-lasting effects for students who receive special education services.

Data collected for this study indicate there is a significant preference for the human resources administrative framework by 4-year institutions, compared to both K-12 and community colleges. The data also indicate that when comparing the responses that are in line with the three new predictors of postsecondary success for students utilizing IDEA (psychological empowerment, self-realization and technology skills) those from K-12 and those from postsecondary institutions. As stated in Chapter 4, those in K-12 primarily focus on the student’s needs while postsecondary institutions only respond when students express a need. In all, the results continued to show that postsecondary institutions preferred a human resources-based approach in the preparation of K-12 students for their postsecondary experience.

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**Limitations**

The limitations for this study included geographic boundaries, the format of the survey, and the existence of a COVID-19 pandemic. The study was focused on and limited to the Central San Joaquin Valley, specifically Fresno and Merced Counties, and thus it only includes perspectives from special education instructors and administrators from one region of California. Using a survey to capture activities and perceived important and impact could possibly obscure some of the story by limiting possible responses. In some cases, the questions presented made it difficult to compare the answers of the respondents in K-12 to the postsecondary respondents as K-12 answered about their use of specific approaches while postsecondary respondents answered about what they thought would be the best approach or priority. There was also one additional question that was not included in the postsecondary questions, creating no means of comparison. After collecting the data, I found there may be some measurement error due to the use of the term “transition” since it was interpreted in different ways depending on the program the administrator or educator worked in. Future studies should ensure that all interviewees /sample are teaching/working with students who are graduating with a diploma and transitioning to college. This would reduce the varying definition used for the word transition. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the middle of the study and influenced the interview and question format. Meetings were conducted via Zoom to assure social distancing and some questions were moved to a survey, rather than gathered through classroom observations or during interviews, as originally planned.

**Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research**

There are several important initial findings presented here, but this research could be expanded and enhanced with a survey of the students utilizing IDEA in the Central San Joaquin Valley, as they transitioned from K-12 to postsecondary during the COVID 19 pandemic. The research could also be replicated once the pandemic is over. Emphasis

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should be on the years between 2020 and 2022. The responses from the second survey could be compared to the responses from this survey to gather insight toward improving, modifying, or confirming current best practices utilizing both the human resources and bureaucratic frameworks.

A study with an equal sample of K-12 students who have been instructed on self determination and have led their IEP meetings versus a sample who students who did not self- advocate or receive special guidance. The study could follow the students through the transition and into their college experience, observing how they handled their self disclosure, capturing their use of services and requests for accommodations, and tracking their success in earning college credits.

When the Supreme Court passed the landmark case, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1* (2017), questioning what constitutes “educational benefit” by school districts in order to provide Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), it changed the trajectory for many students with differing abilities. After that ruling, students had the legal right to be supported in K-12 to a progressive level, given their own unique situation, with the right to determine their own future. This study attempted to add to the benefit knowledge; more is needed.

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