

**Postsecondary Success Stories: Perspectives of Adults with Intellectual and Developmental  
Disabilities**

**Abstract**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 highlights the need for special education and related personnel to prepare youth with disabilities for adulthood, particularly in the areas of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. In accordance with this policy, our study used qualitative case reporting to examine the personal perspectives of three adults with IDD in the outcome domains outlined by the IDEA. Using positive psychology and self-determination theories we sought to better understand the diverse factors that contributed to the participants' "successes" in these areas. Results revealed a series of evidence-based predictors of success contributed to overcoming challenges to employment, postsecondary education, and independent living for participants. Implications for research, policy, and practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* intellectual and developmental disabilities; evidence-based predictors; postsecondary education; competitive, integrated employment; independent living

## **Postsecondary Success Stories: Perspectives of Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

The quality of life (QOL) of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in community settings has increasingly become a priority topic area in education research, policy, and practice (Schippers et al., 2015). Researchers use QOL to largely address the relative adequacy of individual livelihoods in integrated environments (Schippers et al., 2015). Although regarded as both subjective and objective in its individual and societal interpretations (Halpern, 1993), recent literature indicates that QOL is “the achievement of certain developmental tasks” (Henninger & Taylor, 2014, p. 98) and considers QOL “the ultimate goal of a transition process” (Canha et al., 2016, p. 160). Successful transitions can occur throughout childhood and adolescence (e.g., from preschool to kindergarten, entrance into secondary education), and they largely prepare young adults for life in the postsecondary world (e.g., obtaining full-time employment, getting married; Henninger & Taylor, 2014).

Although the transition process presents opportunities for growth and independence, people with disabilities often encounter challenges that consequently hinder positive post-school outcomes and lower individual QOL. For example, only 35.9% of 18- 64-year old adults with disabilities (not living in institutions) were employed in 2017, compared to 76.8% of those without disabilities (Lauer & Houtenville, 2018). In terms of education, only 10.3% of people with disabilities held 4-year college degrees, which is less than half the rate of the general population (21.4%). Finally, poverty rates for adults with disabilities (26.7%) were more than double that of the general population (11.6%).

Unfortunately, these statistics are even more grim for adults with IDD, who experience some of the poorest post-school outcomes compared to those identified with other disabilities

and those without disabilities (Thoma et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005). Improvements to these outcome domains are critical for enhanced QOL, especially with technological and medical advancements increasing life expectancies of the IDD population and a deinstitutionalization movement continuously striving for home and community-based services to greater support aging family members/parents (Brown, 2017).

Federal policy in the United States aimed to address the overwhelmingly negative outcomes experienced in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and independent living by mandating special education supports/services to assist transition-aged youth with disabilities in achieving their post-school goals (i.e., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004) and prohibiting discrimination in employment, state and local government, public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, and telecommunication (i.e., Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA], 1991). In alignment with federal policy, recent literature conceptualizes these transition domains (employment, postsecondary education, and independent living) as outcome areas for post-school success (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009). For the purpose of this study, we defined “postsecondary success” as the attainment of education, employment, and/or independent living, which are activities listed under the IDEA Part B, Indicator 14, as desired results of transition services. We used the IDEA Part B, Indicator 14 definition of higher education, which refers to being enrolled full- or part-time in community college (2-year program) or college/university (4-or more year program) and completing 1 term. Employment refers to competitive integrated employment in which the person is appropriately compensated for their work at a rate that is comparable to the rate which employees without disabilities would receive for the same work, or corresponding with the local minimum wage laws. Since independent living is not directly defined by the IDEA, we referenced the National

Council on Independent Living (2020) and defined independent living as when a person is in charge of the management of their own day-to-day life, including the decision of “how to live, work, and take part in their community” (para. 11) and actively resides in a location that is away from a primary caregiver.

Correlational research identifies 20 evidence-based predictors of post-school success during secondary education, including career awareness, community experiences, exit exam requirements/high school diploma status, inclusion in general education, interagency collaboration, occupational courses, paid employment/work experience, parental involvement, program of study, self-advocacy/self-determination, self-care/independent living skills, social skills, student support, transition program, vocational education, and work study (Test et al., 2009), as well as parent expectations, youth autonomy/decision-making, goal setting, and travel skills (Mazzotti et al., 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Our research uses positive psychology and self-determination theories to examine specific postsecondary outcomes for people with IDD (e.g., Shogren et al., 2015). Positive psychology is a strength-based approach to understanding human experiences and development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The emphasis of positive psychology lay on the subjective experiences and positive individual traits of the individual that contribute to QOL. In contrast, literature presented a historically deficit view of adults with IDD until more recent decades, where scholarship and research in alternative perspectives has increasingly focused more on the strengths and capabilities of people with IDD (Shogren et al., 2006). Notably, disability and psychology fields shifted focus from deficit-based to strength-based approaches.

Specifically, positive psychology is a large and growing framework used in education comprising many constructs, such as interpersonal relationships, QOL, and self-determination.

Self-determination theory (Shogren et al., 2017) falls within the paradigm of positive psychology and has also been heavily discussed in parallel within the disability field, as noted previously. The self-determination movement advocated for the empowerment of people with disabilities so they may direct their own lives and make their own decisions. Positive psychology and self-determination are both frameworks that shift focus from deficits and challenges to enhancing the experience of the person by prioritizing people's strengths and capacities. Both theories propose that everyone is capable of making decisions, having preferences, developing skills, and setting goals, as long as they receive support and opportunities to do so, if needed (Shogren et al., 2006).

Relevant research also used positive psychology and self-determination theories to examine their impact on and association with specific postsecondary outcomes for people with IDD. For example, research found that students' self-determination positively predicted their community access and employment outcomes one year following graduation (Shogren et al., 2015). Therefore, students with higher self-determination were more likely to have employment one year after they left high school. Additionally, adults who participated in an employment-focused self-determination intervention (when seeking employment) reported enhanced abilities to identify their knowledge and strengths (Timmons et al., 2011). Notably, all participants experienced positive job outcomes when utilizing the tools from the intervention including gaining employment and requesting more hours at work.

Related, recent research investigated the perspectives on independent living of individuals with IDD, their parents, and educators (Ioanna, 2020). The researcher determined

that supporting self-determination in people with IDD is critical for independent living. People with IDD also claim that self-determination is important to their success in postsecondary education (Ju et al., 2017). A systematic literature review revealed several areas of self-determination associated with postsecondary school successes, including self-advocacy, self-awareness, problem solving, and goal setting and attainment (Ju et al., 2017). Therefore, in accordance with previous strength-based research, we used positive psychology and self-determination theories as frameworks to develop our research hypotheses, guide participant interactions, and analyze findings.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of our study was to explore the experiences of adults with IDD who have obtained positive post-school successes in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and/or independent living. Using a combination of positive psychology and self-determination theories, we addressed the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent did participants experience evidence-based predictors of post-school success during their secondary education?
- (2) How did participants' secondary experiences lead them to obtain employment, postsecondary education and/or independent living?
- (3) What factors are perceived to contribute to improved quality of life according to participants?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

We interviewed three participants, each serving as a case for one of the following outcome areas: (a) postsecondary education; (b) competitive, integrated employment; and (c)

independent living. Thus, we implemented a case report of three participants with three separate postsecondary experiences. A case report describes a novel practice or occurrence without the implementation of a scientific method-driven intervention (Jansen, 1999). Often, case reports are used to describe unique medical practices and/or patients; however, we described the experiences of people with IDD in specific postsecondary situations. Since no previous research investigated this phenomenon, a case report of individual experiences is helpful to introduce the situation to the literature so that researchers and practitioners may build off the findings for future research and practice. We designed the current investigation as a pilot study for future research using a larger number of participants.

We also utilized a purposeful sampling method to recruit participants that met certain criteria (Patton, 2002) after obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval. Eligibility criteria included that participants must have been (a) at least 18 years of age, (b) have an intellectual and/or developmental disability, and (c) have participated in at least one of the following outcome areas: independent living; competitive, integrated employment; and/or postsecondary education. Thus, our participants fall in the minority compared to the overall population of adults with IDD, because historically this population experiences poorer postschool outcomes compared to those with and without disabilities (Lauer & Houtenville, 2018).

Multiple of our participants also experienced more than one outcome area (e.g., two participants were competitively employed and all three participated in postsecondary education), in spite of our wide-spread recruitment efforts. However, participants were not excluded for experiencing success in multiple areas because it would not be realistic nor practical to assume participants only experienced one outcome area. For example, participation in postsecondary

education reduces unemployment and increases wages for workers (Vig, et al., 2016), and impacts employment outcomes for people with IDD (Grigal et al., 2019). Therefore, we exclusively focused on one outcome area for each participant, and the different factors which contributed to that outcome area, although multiple outcome areas may have been experienced. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and limited number of people in the population that meet the study criteria, we deemed the sample size of three to be sufficient.

Recruitment occurred via email and with fliers sent to employees in various institutions (e.g., inclusive higher education programs, disability organizations, centers) that offer services and supports to people with IDD. The institutions notified their members about our research study. Potential participants, or the parents/caregivers of potential participants, contacted the second author about their interest and eligibility for the study. The second author determined participant eligibility, and, if the participant was eligible, she connected the participant with the first author for review of informed consent and to schedule the interview.

Table 1 illustrates participant demographic information. It is important to note that due to the significance of Kathleen's disability, Kathleen's mother asked to be present during the interview to help communicate her daughter's responses to the interview questions (e.g., provide context to her answers). We confirmed this accommodation with the IRB prior to conducting the interview, also confirming the mother's understanding that she was not a participant in this study, and rather, she could only interpret Kathleen's responses on an as needed basis. Kathleen's second accommodation included receiving a copy of the interview questions before the interview because she required extended time to process and respond to questions. As explained by Kathleen's mother, Kathleen also experiences difficulty with abstract thinking and drawing conclusions. Thus, any follow-up questions (not provided beforehand) asked during

Kathleen's interview were modified from "how" and "why" type-questions to asking Kathleen to provide examples of the experiences she reported or feelings she expressed.

[Insert Table 1]

### **Interview Protocol**

The first author conducted the interviews online using Zoom video conferencing platform. Participants received a \$25 gift card as compensation for their participation. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. During each interview, the first author collected demographic information and asked participants to describe their postsecondary education situation (e.g. higher education, employment, living situation). The preceding questions focused on their secondary and postsecondary experiences in one of the three aforementioned areas (i.e., the domains outlined by the IDEA, 2004). Correlational research identifies several evidence-based predictors of these domains (Test et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2016); therefore, we created a separate set of interview questions for each participant that corresponded with the evidence-based predictors of their postsecondary education situation. Thus, the participants were only assessed for the predictors associated with their experienced outcome area based on previous evidence found in correlational research.

### **Credibility Measures**

We took several steps to substantiate the credibility and validity of the study (Brantlinger et al., 2005). First, we understand that a researcher's identity and experiences contribute to the way they view and analyze qualitative data (Trainor & Graue, 2014), and we hold unique identities that influenced the theoretical framework and therefore the analysis of the data. Thus, we assessed our positionality and reflexivity in order to practice methodological and interpretive transparency. The first author specializes in supporting young adults with neurodevelopmental

disabilities during the postsecondary transition process and in emerging adulthood, and the second author has experience as a mental health counselor, working with people and families of children with neurodevelopmental disabilities. Our positionality were influential to the study, as they take a person-centered, strength-based approach in their research and practices, which aligns with components of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Therefore, the study's utilization of positive psychology as a theoretical framework is a result of our background and experience, chosen by each of us intentionally in order to facilitate an interdisciplinary analysis of successful postsecondary outcomes. Due to the second author's background as a mental health professional, this author had to reflexively assess their interpretation of data to ensure that they did not hyper focus on the mental health of the participants, which, albeit important, was not part of the scope of the present study.

We also conducted member checks with participants as another measure of validity (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Finally, we created a non-academic write-up of the primary findings of the study in the format of a newspaper article and sent each of our participants the article for feedback and approval; all three participants responded and approved the content and themes of the write-up without changes.

### **Data Analysis**

We transcribed interviews with all potential identifiers (e.g., names of people, places, and programs) removed. We coded data using ATLAS.ti independently. To answer research question one, we used theory driven codes for the presence of evidence-based predictors (EBPs; as outlined by Test et al., 2009) independently and compared results of all three transcripts to determine inter-rater reliability. Initial inter-rater reliability was 92.3% agreement and resulted in a final 100% agreement following discussion among researchers on EBPs. For research

questions two and three, we used open coding for a theoretical thematic analysis and followed Braun and Clarke's (2008) six-phase framework. We read the transcripts (step one) and identified initial codes (step two) independently and then met after coding each transcript was completed to discuss codes and themes (step three). We met again once they coded all three transcripts to complete step four, during which we reviewed themes and used cross-case analysis to compare the data from the participants, looking for similar or differing results (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). We then refined and defined the themes (step five) and co-wrote the results section using the finalized themes (step six; Braun & Clarke, 2008). Final themes across all three research questions included: (a) Evidence-Based Predictors, (b) Ability Over Disability, (c) "You can't do it:" Challenges Faced, (d) Self-Advocacy, (e) Benefits of Postsecondary Education, and (f) More Alike Than Different.

## **Results**

Our participants shared their thoughts and experiences regarding the different factors they perceived to have contributed to their successes after high school. Although all three adults with IDD have starkly different life experiences, several recurring themes arose throughout the interviews. These themes are discussed below and are organized according to the research questions.

### **Themed Section of Findings –RQ1**

Our first research question inquired whether our participants experienced EBPs of post-school success in the outcome areas of employment, postsecondary education, and independent living during their secondary education. As previously discussed there are 20 total EBPs associated with positive employment outcomes, 14 associated with positive outcomes in postsecondary education, and five associated with positive outcomes for independent living

(Mazzotti et al., 2013; Test et al., 2009).

Figure 1 illustrates whether participants expressed they experienced EBPs for their success area. Marked x's indicate that the participant experienced a predictor for their success area, whereas marked -'s indicate that the participant did not experience that predictor. The boxes are shaded if the EBP in the row is not an EBP for their success area. Participants were not evaluated for whether they experienced predictors for other success areas aside for the area targeted in their individual interviews.

[Insert Figure 1]

### ***Employment***

Kathleen answered questions on the factors she believed contributed to her post-school success in the area of employment. Currently, Kathleen is employed in two different part-time positions, at a child development center and a restaurant. As shown in Figure 1, Kathleen reported experiencing 14 of the 20 predictors for employment, with “probably the most helpful for [her to] prepare for employment was being included in general education classes and activities.” Although, the amount of inclusion Kathleen experienced during her high school career was limited to electives before she moved to a new area and attended a different school.

### ***Postsecondary Education***

Kyle answered questions on the factors he believed contributed to his post-school success in the area of postsecondary education. Kyle is a recent graduate of an inclusive higher education program for college students with IDD. This program provided Kyle with inclusive classroom experiences with peers without disabilities and employment internships that best aligned with his preferences and interests.

The literature identifies 14 EBPs to positively impact outcomes in postsecondary

education (Mazzotti et al., 2013; Test et al., 2009); however, Kyle expressed experiencing only five EBPs during his secondary education. In spite of Kyle's expressed belief that his high school experiences largely did not prepare him for college, it is possible that the quality of his experienced predictors outweighed the limited quantity of those he experienced.

### ***Independent Living***

Finally, Ashley shared her perspective on which factors contributed to her post-school success in the area of independent living. Recently, Ashley moved into her own apartment, after formerly living with her grandmother throughout high school and college. Although Ashley reported experiencing four out of the five EBPs for independent living in high school, Ashley stated that her secondary educators "didn't really prepare" her for living on her own. Instead, she learned more about the skills needed to live independently during postsecondary education-- "In high school, um, we didn't like, I felt like they didn't like, kind of, prepare me for like living on my own. And, and it's like, it just hit me when I finally started going to college."

### **Themed Section of Findings –RQ2**

In response to the second research question, we aimed to understand how our participants' secondary experiences lead them to obtain employment, postsecondary education and/or independent living. Two themes emerged from our interviews in response to this research question: "Ability Over Disability" and "You Can't Do It: Challenges Faced."

#### ***Ability Over Disability***

All three participants expressed the need for others to recognize and value their abilities, rather than focus on their disabilities. For example, Ashley explained "even though I graduated [from college] with a certificate, I still applied myself in class--I was actually doing real courses... Even though I had an education coach to help me, I was real independent." While she

recognized some differences between her college experience and that of her peers without disabilities, Ashley focused on what she accomplished, which included going to college and being independent. Similarly, Kyle also expressed wanting others to see him as a person with strengths and abilities first. However, he took a step further and shared his vision for all people with disabilities and for how society views the disability community at large--“I want more people with disabilities to know... they do have abilities... Of course being realistic is important, but there's also a focus on what people can contribute, not just what they can't.” Overall, the participants’ narratives emphasized people’s abilities over their disabilities, with external structural and societal challenges creating the largest barriers to their post-school success, as described below.

### ***“You can’t do it:” Challenges Faced***

The participants reported several challenges to reaching their postsecondary goals, including negative perceptions about their abilities, a lack of information or resources, and limitations set on their educational endeavors (i.e., taking certain classes, participating in standardized tests). For Kyle, the limited information available on options for postsecondary education was one of the major challenges he experienced in initially seeking this desired outcome area after high school. When he graduated from high school, he sought out a local option: “originally, I was in a compensatory ed program at [a community college], for some people [it] worked, but there wasn't a whole lot of life or like value for me there.” Following a surgery that resulted in extended recovery time, Kyle was able to share more with his mother about his dreams to attend college. He explained: “I knew that I wanted a true college experience and not to go back to compensatory ed., so [my mom] was trying to look into, like, more options for me at the time.” It was through her efforts then that she found a university with a

postsecondary education program for adults with IDD.

Kathleen also reported challenges to obtaining her experienced outcome area (competitive, integrated employment) in her desired field, child care. Initially, Kathleen reported that school staff underestimated her abilities to work in this type of setting. In addition to the limited expectations set upon Kathleen from school staff, Kathleen also reported “There are a lot of licensing requirements that I may not be able to meet at first. Finding a job that I can do in a child care setting would be hard.” Finally, Ashley reported several instances of people underestimating her abilities, such as when school staff did not allow Ashley to take state standardized tests (assessments often required for college admission), despite her expressed desire to take the tests. In fact, education and medical professionals have underestimated Ashley’s abilities and limited her potential across her lifespan, as she described:

Even down to when I was little, like they told me I would never be able to, they told me I would never be able to talk or walk. But I'm walking and talking. They told me I was never gonna, I would never graduate from high school, but I graduated... And they told me I would never graduate, go to college, or even graduate from college. But I went to college. And I was proud of myself... So with me, achieving all those things [that] the doctors and my teachers told me I would never achieve, by me doing that, I was so proud of myself because...no matter [what] or how ya'll feel... I know I can do anything, and I'm not gonna let y'all, you know, just like, underestimate me like that and saying that i'm not gonna be here or, you know, do anything or achieve anything.

### **Themed Section of Findings –RQ3**

Ashley’s quote provides a transition to our third research question, which inquired about the different factors perceived to contribute to overcoming barriers and improving overall quality

of life according to our sample's unique perspectives. We identified three themes in response to this research question: (a) the need and importance of self-advocacy; (b) the benefits of postsecondary education enrollment and participation; and (c) promoting the understanding that we, people with and without disabilities, are more alike than different.

### *Self-Advocacy*

All three participants expressed the need to self-advocate, especially when faced with the challenges and barriers described above. This is especially salient for Ashley, who when told by medical and education professionals that she would never be able to walk, talk, or graduate high school, defied the odds and achieved well above and beyond what was expected of her. In order to achieve such success, Ashley expressed the need to speak up for what she wanted, preferred, and needed, from advocating for standardized testing in high school to conveying her desire to live independently after college graduation. Through self-advocacy, Ashley overcame the low expectations set upon her by many teachers at her school.

Overall, the individual self-advocacy expressed by participants included having knowledge of themselves (e.g., their strengths, weaknesses, goals, dreams) and their rights (e.g., legal rights) and communicating this knowledge to or for others. This follows in accordance with Test et al.'s (2005) conceptual framework, which categorizes individual self-advocacy into four main components: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. For Kathleen, knowing herself included recognizing day-to-day wants, preferences, and needs (e.g., such as knowing she wants toast with breakfast) to knowing her preferences for more life changing outcomes (e.g., wanting to attend college and live in an apartment with friends).

Ashley strives to continue her communication and leadership skills by engaging in future speaking opportunities that will encourage others to advocate for themselves as well. In her

recommendation to other youth and adults with disabilities, Ashley stated: “Don't let anybody underestimate them regardless of what the people, or what the teachers say, you know, and push hard, because if you don't push hard, nothing's going to be done.” For example, high school students with disabilities need to speak up in their individualized education program (IEP) meetings, as Ashley reported, specifically by telling their IEP team members “what they want, tell them what they need, and if they not able to talk or something, the parents need to advocate for them and tell them what they think they should need or what they think they should want for them.” Oftentimes, though, Ashley referenced how parents do not speak on the behalf of their children. However, if neither the parent nor the student with the disability advocate, “then nothing's going to be done.”

All three of the participants also experienced a growth in their self-advocacy skills over time. For instance, Kathleen reported a growth in her self-advocacy skills after becoming immersed in a more supportive environment with her current employment situation, compared to her high school. Although Kyle provided an example of self-advocating in high school (specifically recognizing he no longer needed speech services and communicating with his case manager to end these services), Kyle explained that his self-advocacy skills largely did not flourish until after secondary education, specifically when he entered college. He largely attributed this change to the increased amount of opportunities and experiences he received, such as advocating for his needs on and around his university campus, engaging in fellowships and trainings, presenting at national and state level conferences, and blogging about his personal experiences on social media.

Kyle also referenced engaging--or wanting to engage-- in group self-advocacy. For example, a year after Kyle graduated from college, he became involved with an alliance of

disability advocates, where he “would go to high schools and teach students about disability history and advocate in their own meetings.” Today, Kyle works for a national disability organization, who are very “supportive of [his] work.” Based on his individual and group advocacy, Kyle has won national and state level awards.

### ***Benefits of Postsecondary Education***

Interestingly, all three participants participated in an inclusive higher education program, although only Kyle’s interview focused on this outcome area, and reported several benefits of their participation. For instance, Ashley became more involved with different organizations and began engaging in speaking opportunities which, she explained, “help[ed] me be more open and more outspoken cause before you couldn't really get me to talk because I was shy.” Kyle also was involved in organizations on campus, including a fraternity where he “was able to connect with other brothers” and even maintain some of these friendships post-graduation; as Kyle reported, “I still have a lot of friends who I still keep in contact with. I've been able to go to a couple of their weddings.”

Kyle keeps in contact with several of his college mentors as well, many of whom still support him today. During college, these mentors took Kyle to numerous conferences, where he received the opportunity to talk about his college experience. They also introduced him to a program focused on supporting people with neurodevelopmental disabilities, where Kyle received leadership training and “learned more about interdisciplinary work [and] working with people from different backgrounds.” As previously discussed, these experiences also helped Kyle enhance his self-advocacy skills.

While all three participants had job coaches and received employment internships during their college experiences, Ashley additionally reported that her program also “helped me get my

first paying job, and also like, just getting [me], prepared for like college life and outside the world life and also career jobs because you know, throughout the program, I did a lot of like mock interviews, and they helped me prepare for what they say on the interview, how to dress, how to present yourself, how to be professional.” For Kathleen, college not only prepared her for employment, but it also helped her obtain one of the part-time jobs she has today.

### *More Alike Than Different*

The final theme we identified was that people with and without IDD are more alike than they are different. Our participants expressed having experiences and holding aspirations similar to those who are neurotypical. For instance, Ashley shared that she looked forward to hosting her family for holidays at her new home. She also shared: “I just want a job. I just want to enjoy myself.” Similarly, Kathleen looks forward to getting her own apartment and living with friends. Kathleen also shared some of her family’s values, values that are often seen in American households: “everyone in my family goes to high school, college, and then works, so I should too.” For Kyle, he enjoys traveling around the world and hopes to one day live in a big city.

Additionally, some of the participants discussed big dreams that they have for their futures. Ashley would like to write a book about her life story. Likewise, Kyle aspires to become an accredited speaker and author. He also wants to continue his work as an advocate: “I do like policy work and advocating and do some professional work in that field, by helping out with nonprofits.” The participants use their life circumstances to inspire their long term goals.

### **Discussion**

Our study explored the unique perspectives of three adults with IDD who have experienced post-school success in the areas of competitive, integrated, employment, postsecondary education, and independent living, as it is defined by federal legislation and recent

literature. We understand that our participants represent only a small portion of adults with IDD who have acquired success in these three areas (Thoma et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005); however, the purpose of this research was to learn more about the diverse factors that contributed to their successes, with the hopes that this information will inform and encourage others to understand what and how these outcome areas can be sought and obtained through a positive psychology and self-determination theoretical lens.

### **Implications for Practice**

Foremost, our participants showed that adults with IDD can achieve success in primary outcome areas, with some adults needing more or less support than others to accomplish their goals (e.g., the need for a job coach, parental support, mentorship, accommodations). However, while achieving success in the outcome areas, our participants also expressed having faced numerous societal barriers (e.g., negative stigma and under-estimation of their abilities), which often led to missed opportunities. For instance, one participant, Ashley, reported that her school almost forbid her from taking a standardized test required for admission into many higher education institutes. Without the chance to take such an exam, many people with IDD, like Ashley, may inadvertently be prevented from the opportunity to apply and attend college--which has later implications for employment (e.g., wages) and independent living (e.g., financing supports for community-based living).

Shaw and Dukes (2013) also reported that adults with a high school degree or lower are approximately two times more likely to be unemployed than adults with a bachelor's degree or greater. Adults in employment positions requiring a high school diploma or less also earn lower wages, on average, than adults in employment positions requiring some form of postsecondary education (Richards & Terkanian, 2013). Further, occupations requiring some form of

postsecondary education are projected to grow at a faster rate by 2022 (14%) than positions requiring a high school diploma or less (9.1%; Richards & Terkanian, 2013). Practitioners working with transition-aged youth should be mindful of the current outcomes and be responsive to their students' individualized wants and needs, valuing their aspirations post-high school and identifying ways they can help students achieve their goals.

Practitioners should also provide their students with opportunities to express these aspirations through engaging in various self-determined behaviors (e.g., goal setting, self-advocating, choice making; Shogren et al., 2015). Although it is important to foster self-determined skills throughout the lifespan (Palmer et al, 2013), our research pinpoints the need for practitioners to support students' self-determination skill development to prepare students for the increased challenges and stressors after high school (Test et al., 2009). In particular, our participants expressed the necessity to know their wants and needs (and their right to access and acquire them) before they could communicate what they wanted and needed effectively on the behalf of themselves and others. This process follows in accordance with Test et al.'s (2005b) conceptualization of what it means to self-advocate. Practitioners should incorporate instruction that emphasizes Test et al.'s (2005b) self-advocacy components (i.e., knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership), given that students with disabilities can be taught all four of these components (Test et al., 2005a).

Our study's theoretical framework also stresses a shift in perspective, specifically from a historically deficit-based approach to engaging in a strengths-based approach when working with people with IDD using a combination of positive psychology and self-determination theories. A strengths-based approach prioritizes people's strengths and capacities (Seligman &

Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Shogren et al., 2017), which our participants argued is especially critical when supporting people with disabilities in achieving their postsecondary goals.

Interestingly, our participants described several experiences that posed as barriers to achieving their desired goals (e.g., negative stigma and under-estimation of their abilities), using the social model of disability, which argues that people are disabled by society and not their medical conditions (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1975). As a prime example, Ashley heard from adults throughout her childhood and adolescence all the things she could never accomplish because of her disability. However, this did not stop Ashley from pursuing her goals. Instead, it was the attitudinal barriers regarding her disability that presented the biggest challenges. Kyle also expressed how people often judged him before they got to know him because of their negative attitudes and misconceptions towards his disability.

Ableist societal attitudes also purport that people with IDD must be protected from having their feelings hurt or even experiencing failure. However, without giving people with IDD opportunities to practice self-determined skills and learn from their failures, we may never fully understand how much each person can accomplish (Perske, 1972). Practitioners should inform their students with disabilities and their families of different options for community engagement and also create opportunities for inclusion, including when opportunities may not be readily available. For Kathleen, her support staff collaborated with an employer to create a position that aligned with our participants' wants and needs, while meeting the needs of the local business. Through customizing her employment, Kathleen's support staff and employer used an individualized and person-centered approach to identifying a position that matched Kathleen's needs and the needs of the local business (Customized Employment, 2020).

### **Implications for Policy**

Foremost, federal law, under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), mandates that vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies allocate federal funds for Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETs) to eligible, or potentially eligible, students with disabilities. In Table 2, we compare the evidence-based practices experienced by our participants to the required pre-employment services offered under the WIOA. These required services do not include supports for encouraging parent involvement or expectations, nor inclusion in general education settings, although, if funding remains, additional authorized Pre-ETs may offer supports for increased inclusion in communities and workplace settings.

[Insert Table 2]

Currently, VR agencies must allocate only a minimum 15% of their federal funds to these services under WIOA's amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Given that these services align with our participants' experienced evidence-based predictors for post-school success, there needs to be greater funds allocated to Pre-ET services to foster greater post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities. Additional funding can also be allocated to provide support for the three evidence-based predictors that do not directly align with Pre-ET services, including inclusion in general education, parent expectations, and parent involvement.

Findings from our study also signal the need for more employer incentives for hiring people with disabilities in competitive and integrated environments, earning at least minimum wage. Research suggests that the process of customized employment (CE) is an effective strategy for improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities (Riesen et al., 2015). From a policy lens, CE is also regarded as an effective means for fostering integrated employment. Effective implementation of CE requires an increased understanding of the potential benefits of using CE for employers and employees with IDD as well as an increased understanding of

strategies for capacity building at the local, state, and federal levels. Given that states use different funding strategies to support people with IDD working in the community (Karakus et al., 2011), there also needs to be increased awareness of potential funding sources to cover the costs of the numerous supports and services needed by many adults with IDD. One state-level option, covered under the Medicaid program (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2020), includes 1915(c) Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) waivers.

In addition to providing employment services for many people with IDD, these waivers provide other non-medical and medical services, so people with IDD can both work and live in the community, rather than live segregated in institutional settings (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2020). Legislators increased support for community inclusion, partly due to the cost-effectiveness of HCBS waivers, compared to the cost of running institutions (National Council on Disability, 2012), and also since the Supreme Courts' *Olmstead v. L.C.*, 527 U.S. 581) ruled in 1999 that "unjustified segregation of people with disabilities is a form of unlawful discrimination under the ADA" (p. 583). Our participants expressed the desire to work and live in the community. Ashley even received federal financial support that enabled her to live on her own. Without this support, she may not have been able to accomplish this outcome area. Therefore, we recommend increased funding be allocated to Medicaid programs in support of HCBS waivers.

Finally, our participants revealed that their postsecondary educational experiences appeared to supplement self-advocacy skill-development, opportunities for employment, peer socialization, and more. These skills and opportunities were provided through their enrollment and participation in comprehensive transition programs designed to support people with IDD in college. However, Kyle did not know college could be an option for him until two years after his

high school graduation; inclusive higher education programs did not gain momentum until after the United States Congress reauthorized the Higher Education Act in 2008 and allocated federal funds in support of these programs for students with intellectual disability on a national scale. For programs that receive federal funding, policy requires they have a particular emphasis on improving employment outcomes for the population of people with IDD, as supported by the Higher Education Act reauthorization (HEOA, 2008). Increased appropriations for these programs, funded under HEOA, are needed to increase the number of college students with IDD on a national scale.

### **Limitations and Implications for Research**

Given our small sample size, future research should explore the unique perspectives of a greater number of participants who have experienced success in one or more of the three domains examined in this study. Although our research examined three areas of post-school success identified by recent literature (Test et al., 2009) and federal legislation (e.g., IDEA, 2004), more research is needed to explore successes in other areas as well, since definitions of “post-school success” are culturally relative and different from person to person. Initially, we sought a culturally diverse sample given that the definition of QOL and access to opportunities may differ among different demographic groups (Schippers et al., 2015). Therefore, we inquired about the race and gender of potential participants prior to selection for the study. However, we received limited inquiries for participation from individuals of color ( $n = 1$ ). This also beckons the need for future research to include a more racially and ethnically diverse sample, given the inherent intersectionality of IDD and race (e.g., Kramarczuk Voulgarides & Tefera, 2017). Therefore, future studies should broaden recruitment efforts and establish greater partnerships

with community organizations and groups in order to encourage a more racially and ethnically diverse sample.

Finally, our research included self-reported data, which could lead to potential participant bias (McMillan, 2016). However, as previously described, it was our intent of this research to examine the direct perspectives of adults with IDD to acquire a greater understanding of their experiences and opinions on how they acquired success in the areas of competitive, integrated employment; postsecondary education, and independent living. Without including the direct perspectives of people with disabilities in education research, we may never fully understand the range of skills needed and experiences that could contribute to positive outcomes and high quality of life for different adults with IDD.

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