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# THE ROLE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVOCATES ON THE LIVES OF STUDENTS FACING CHALLENGES

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## ABSTRACT

Students with learning disabilities often face challenges from childhood through adulthood and their parents and caregivers need to make adjustments to support and adapt to the needs of their children to support them educationally, socially, and emotionally. Some effects on families with learning disabilities are stress, lack of support from extended family, and difficulties interacting with school staff. For these reasons, it is important for families to seek the support from special needs advocates. Minority students who are disproportionately represented within the education system may benefit from a special needs advocate, as they are often at greater risk of dropping out of high school, becoming unemployed, and being incarcerated. Special education advocates help families understand special education laws, the IEP process, and parental rights. The best type of advocate is knowledgeable and has expertise within the special education field. One can determine this based on the relationships an advocate has with their past clients. Ultimately, having a supportive advocate who works collaboratively with the family, has been shown to make the difference between an effective and ineffective postsecondary transition plan for a student with a disability. This literature review aims to (1) investigate how disproportionality and socioeconomic status may impact children's postsecondary lifestyles, (2) assess the role and selection process of an effective special education advocate, and (3) gain insight into how pivotal advocate/client relationships are in supporting the child's transition into adulthood.

## INTRODUCTION

How do we become the help we wish to see in special education? Within society, families with students who have disabilities may struggle to gain the help and resources needed for success. Oftentimes, parents

and the staff face difficulties in their efforts to collaborate on behalf of students with disabilities (Burke et al., 2016). For this reason, it is important to have an advocate for these children to ensure that they are receiving the education and services they need and deserve (Mueller, 2014). Special education advocate roles are to work with children and families of children with disabilities to help improve their lives. The first step to properly advocate for a child with special needs is to understand what it means to be an advocate. To properly advocate for disabled children, one could educate themselves on special education laws, the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) process, and parental rights (Goldman et al., 2020). The aforementioned authors have recognized not only can it be important for guardians to look for these qualities when finding an advocate for their child, but it is also equally important to examine how knowledgeable and dependable an advocate was with former clients. In order to become an effective advocate, it is important for the family they are working with to feel heard, respected, valued, and understood. It is also important for the family to assess the advocate's effectiveness in helping prepare children to become self-advocates in the future (Carr, 2019). Self-advocacy allows individuals with disabilities to not only feel empowered and supported, but also creates space for the client to have a voice and recognize issues of discrimination and bias if this arises.

Furthermore, when children are not getting the resources they need from schools and agencies, parents may seek advocates to help them feel supported (Goldman et al., 2020). For example, parents desire disability advocates who are knowledgeable and great communicators within their field, which in return allows them to receive the help they need. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2022), "for most racial/ethnic groups, specific learning disabilities and speech or language impairments were the two most common types of disabilities, accounting for at least 42 percent of students receiving IDEA services" (para. 5). The typical age range for students requesting an advocate is from 3 to 21 (Goldman et al., 2020). This age range is the developmental stage of growth for children transitioning into young adults. Given how uniquely different each child is in special education, parents could make it their duty to ensure that their advocates are dedicated to the academic success of their children. Parents could investigate the past relationships between special education advocates and parents and their support of the family (Boduch, 2019). Not only could parents explore their potential advocates' past cases, but they could examine their relationships with other parents by conducting interviews.

Examining the past relationships between the parents and the advocates is a significant step in choosing an effective advocate. It may help to determine the impact on the quality of their child's special education programming, which may help the school to be a better support to the child and their families (Boduch, 2019). As a team, parents and advocates could work with the school to create a partnership to support the whole child to ensure that they are getting the resources they need. A partnership between advocates and parents looks like actively listening, being open about the barriers that can affect all parties involved, and being a resource to each other (Boduch, 2019). Sometimes it is hard for parents to understand the laws and regulations of special education because of a lack of knowledge. This may impact parental engagement because parents may not feel confident enough to advocate for their children during IEP meetings. If special education advocates do not involve the parents and attempt to control the entire narrative during IEP meetings, it can lead to self-doubt within families (Jocelyn, 2019). Instead of taking the steps to reassure parents and help to boost their confidence, some advocates take over during the process. Jocelyn (2019) noted that families' self-doubt about their ability to make decisions for their children as parents causes an unhealthy relationship between the guardians and the advocates. It is important to note that ultimately parents have all of the legal authority to make decisions for their children. Advocates who work with parents as partners in their children's education build trust and help parents feel valued and respected, because parents should have a voice when given the opportunity (Jocelyn, 2019). Having an advocate who works collaboratively with parents promotes learning and growth among students, which allows them to one day be able to advocate for themselves.

Once the family finds an advocate for their child that meets their needs, they can start to prepare their child for adulthood. With guidance, modeling, and support, a child can learn how to advocate for themselves in preparation for adulthood. For students with disabilities who graduate from high school and go off to college, they are now in a position where it is important for them to advocate for themselves. Issues arise when students face difficulty in advocating for their needs. Without the needed support and accommodation in the learning environment, students with disabilities in postsecondary learning environments often have lower completion rates and/or delayed graduations (Ju et al., 2017, as cited in Carr, 2019). To address this issue, the government has implemented some mandatory aids and support for high school students with disabilities transitioning into adulthood. It is required by the Individu-

als with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for each student identified with a disability to include a postsecondary educational plan and an employment plan once they are 16 years old (Carr, 2019). With this plan in place, students can gain services and benefits from the government, but this transition becomes a significant period in their lives causing an even greater need for support. One aspect that contributes to the ability to live independently is the ability to obtain and maintain employment (Carr, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for students with special needs to have support from their families, advocates, and schools to develop a transition plan for life after secondary school and future professional or academic endeavors.

## DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

### Historical Perspectives

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is a federal law originally enacted in 1975 and was formerly called the Education for All Handicap Children Act, which was created to ensure students with disabilities received an equitable and appropriate education. The law guarantees access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). Special education services provide resources for children with disabilities, however for minority students especially, special education could lead to injustices if wrongly placed. According to Gentry (2009), a professor at Jackson State University previous research showed, “one of the first discussions documenting the issue of disproportionate representation of minorities in classes for students with mental retardation/intellectual disability was presented by Lloyd Dunn in 1968” (p. 7). Lloyd Dunn did extensive research on the special education disproportionality to bring public awareness, where he learned that about 60-80% of students being placed into special education classes were from low-income families (Gentry, 2009). Ultimately, special education disproportionality is a problem that dates back to the 1960s, that resulted from segregation. It was a way to continue to keep minorities separated within the education system. A shift from regular education to special education gradually started to be put into effect right after the ruling of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case in 1954 legally ending school segregation (Gentry, 2009).

To address disproportionality in special education, research suggests that states require investigations to assess if there is disproportion-

ality based on race and ethnicity within states and local educational agencies (LEAs) (Michigan Department of Education, MDE, 2018). For this reason, Michigan created the Procedural Safeguards Notice. There are Procedural Safeguard Notices that the federal legislation requires to be given to children's parents every school year (MDE, 2018). Within the Procedural Safeguard Notice, parents are guaranteed support of unilateral placement at a private school at public expense. They are made aware of state complaint procedures, consent rights, procedural safeguards, and the confidentiality of their children's information. Under the "unilateral placement at private schools at public expense" law, private schools are not required to pay for students' special education, but they are required to place students in an environment where needs are addressed (MDE, 2018). It is important for parents to know all the different options to advance their children's education along with the pros and cons. Unfortunately, some parents may not be aware of Procedural Safeguard policies created to support their children. State Complaint Procedures require parents to get the proper training and advocacy support from agencies (MDE, 2018). If they are not granted these services and support, then they can file a state complaint. IDEA offers many services, but in some cases, they are not implemented due to a lack of family and student awareness. Moreover, parents are required to consent to any services and evaluations being conducted by the school district for their child before the school can proceed with the action (MDE, 2018). This grants parents the access to be completely aware and in control of their children's education. The procedural safeguard is a process used to propose or refuse an educational placement of a child (MDE, 2018). While going through this process, a lot of legal documentation is being processed. According to MDE (2018), the state, school, and agencies are required to keep personal information confidential such as access rights, a record of access, a list of types and locations, and hearing information. For all of these social welfare policies listed above, white privilege ideology seems to have guided the evolution of special education disproportionality. So far, the Procedural Safeguard approach to help keep students' information confidential during the research process has helped. It allows for parents to advocate for their children in some ways, preventing significant disproportionality for minority students.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as of June 30, 2020, the Procedural Safeguard guidelines have been updated to reflect social distancing (U.S. Department of Education-OSERS, 2020). LEAs, parents, and schools are required by FERPA and Virtual Learning Services to partner

to ensure families receive their children's educational records and remain confidential by using alternatives like emails, and postal mail when the school is closed (U.S. Department of Education, OSERS 2020). These policies help keep parents involved in their children's education to avoid wrongful placement into special education. These policies are working towards social, economic, and environmental justice. They are protecting people with learning disabilities' educational records, which allows them to feel safe and promotes family involvement. However, the Safeguard does not directly prevent significant disproportionality. Overall, it does not protect those minority students who may be discriminated against when misplaced.

### **The Connection between Disability, Race, and Socioeconomic Status on Postsecondary Lifestyles**

According to the American University (AU) School of Education (2020), "The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that 14 percent of students ages 3 to 21 in the public school system (approximately seven million individuals) received special education services from 2017 to 2018" (para. 2). The data reveals that a large percentage of students are living in poverty further proving this issue to be a socioeconomic problem within the education system. Some school districts target particular communities, or they examine the income status of students, rather than their academic performance data. Research has proven that Black students are 2.8 times more likely to be recognized as having a special Learning Disability (LD) and an Emotional Disturbance (ED) than White students (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). In like manner, not only does this socioeconomic influence have an effect on the education system it affects adulthood. Consequently, the findings indicated Black students who are inappropriately placed into special education tend to experience more behavioral problems. It was reported in the literature that this leads to low-income students making minimum wage, most likely being incarcerated, and living short lives in comparison to their higher-income peers (American University, 2020). Overall, students of color wrongly being placed into special education classes could have a negative impact on their academic achievement. Oftentimes, these students have lower self-esteem when being placed in these classes, which in some cases, results in higher dropout rates. White students with ED graduate at higher rates than students of color (48% vs. 27.5%), causing half to drop out (58%) putting them at a greater risk of being incarcerated (Annamma et al., 2014). Furthermore, the research has shown that "within three to five

years of dropping out, 73% of all students with ED are arrested” (Osher et al., 2002 as cited in Annamma et al., 2014, p. 60). The problem goes from affecting children’s likelihood of success within education to the probability of prison. Long-term disproportionality would not only affect higher education for African American students, but also the employment rate for Black people.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in 2021 research highlights how people with disabilities were more likely to be unemployed compared to people without disabilities for all age groups. Minority groups with disabilities are at a greater chance of being unemployed than their White American counterparts. The unemployment rate for persons with a disability in 2021 was 13.9% for Hispanic Americans, 15.2% for African Americans, and 9.9% for Asian Americans, in comparison to Caucasian Americans, which was 9.2%, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. High rates of incarceration, high school dropout, and unemployment all hinder the quality of life and personal growth of people. Literature regularly indicates the risk of these issues causing many people poor health. The literature review shows that they start to experience underlying health issues like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, hepatitis, or stomach ulcers, then those who graduate (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, ODPHP, 2022). Special education disproportionality creates barriers and can lead to negative consequences within minority communities. The results go beyond adolescents’ education, affecting people’s life trajectories.

### **Current Policies and Resources Affecting Disproportionality**

On the contrary, special education disproportionality highlights conflicting beliefs regarding human dignity for all students and their families. Some minority students are discriminated against based on race, resulting in the misplacement in special education (Gentry, 2009). Currently, the National Center of Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2021) is working toward preventing significant disproportionality by keeping families up to date with new policies and news. The NCLD is an organization that works toward ensuring children, adolescents, and adults all over the nation with learning disabilities gain every opportunity to succeed in school, work, and life (2021). According to the NCLD, there had been a policy proposal in 2016 called Equity in IDEA, which aimed to help schools address systematically targeted disproportionality towards students of color within special education, which was delayed by the Department of Education.



The NCLD provides resources that students and their families should be aware of including the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA) suing the organization for the wrongful delay of the policy (NCLD, 2021). The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (LCCHR) is an advocacy organization that also talked about the Equity in IDEA policy proposed in 2016 (LCCHR, 2017). They actively fight to advocate for equal opportunity and social justice. The Civil and Human Rights organization further provides support for these injustices. They additionally provide other agencies that too help support and advocate for special education disproportionality (LCCHR, 2017). A special education advocate can be sufficient to help families connect to some of these social welfare agencies, ultimately ensuring these students have all the resources they need. Evidently, special education advocates are needed for all disabled students, but especially minority students who face disproportionality.

## SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVOCATE SELECTION AND ROLE

### **Advocate's Education**

Indeed, when seeking an advocate, it is essential to ensure that they are knowledgeable, experienced, and efficacious. The belief that a person can do something while experiencing difficulties context, is a belief in their self-efficacy (Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017). Having a knowledgeable and experienced advocate helps encourage families to gain the services they need for their children. Trainor (2010, as cited in Burke et al., 2018) notes there are four types of advocates. The first is the intuitive advocate, which uses one's intuition or "gut" feeling. The second kind of advocate is the strategist, where they use their special education knowledge and rights. The next special education advocate is the disability expert. These kinds of advocates use their knowledge about the disability of the child. The last kind of advocate for special education is the agent of systemic change. This kind of advocate tries to create systematic change. Thus, many different strategies are composed by these special education advocates that may be helpful, but whether families agree with these methods is unknown (Burke et al., 2018). It is imperative that both families and advocates have a mutual agreement on students' services to ensure the perfect transition plan from secondary school to future endeavors. Hence, the need for training!

With all things considered, it is hard to determine the exact training that is most effective due to the lack of research focusing on the effectiveness of the type of training. Advocates not only need to know about special education, but their knowledge needs to go beyond formal learning. They should possess skills to effectively collaborate with schools diligently without being confrontational (Burke et al., 2016). For example, some skills would be making phone calls, writing letters, contacting someone in authority, and educating professionals about the child's specific strengths, and needs (Wang et al., 2004, as cited in Burke et al., 2016). Many factors are to be taken into consideration when determining the best ways to train potential advocates. The difference between the personal backgrounds of trainees differs from person to person. Some factors that influence the strength of the training programs are the trainees' educational and professional backgrounds (Burke et al., 2016). This plays a factor along with many other different components. The training programs themselves may also play a factor in the effectiveness of a special education advocate, coinciding with the modes of delivery (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services-Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, HHS-SAMHSA, 2005). Nevertheless, with the right training, the advocacy skills of professional advocates greatly increase (Burke et al., 2016).

For example, the Volunteer Advocacy Project (VAP), is a special education training program that helps to enhance the skills of special education advocates. In a research study conducted by Goldman et al. (2018), researchers examined the "perceptions of caregivers and professionals to understand their motivations for becoming advocates, their plans for using their newfound knowledge and skills, and their perceptions of the attributes of special education advocates" (p. 377). Through this research, they found many caregivers who are interested or who had become advocates have been people who too have struggled with the special education system (Nachsen et al., 2001; Trainor 2010, as cited in Goldman et al., 2018). On the other hand, these authors discover some professional advocates are people who have no experience with special education, so they are less likely to have the compassion or motivation to conduct the job. In most cases, they are interested in the field for various other reasons such as to become better at their jobs or for career advancement (Goldman et al., 2018). Therefore, it is critical for parents to seek out the best advocate for their children's needs. This may look like conducting interviews with special education advocates to ensure they have the proper background, training, and motivation. An advocate going through this process creates

a great environment with the student's family and school to become one step closer to having the perfect transitional plan for life after high school.

### **Assessment and Evaluation of Advocate**

It is important for families to assess, examine, and evaluate the role of the advocate. A study was conducted by Burke et al. (2019) at Hammill Institute on Disabilities to evaluate parent and advocate relationships. Participants consisted of nine parents and nine advocates who were required to have been: (1) 18 years of age or older, (2) had an experienced an advocate who completed the VAP in Tennessee or Chicago, and (3) had a child with a learning disability involved in a VAP. These advocates were all well-trained during the VAP process, and they provided support for families by actively communicating with schools to gain resources needed for students, emotionally supporting them during IEP meets, and educating them on their rights, according to the team. A series of dyadic interviews were conducted, where they found most families reached out to advocates due to a lack of support from their children's schools as stated by Burke et al. (2019). Through these interviews, researchers found out all initial interactions with these families were either through phone calls, in-person meetings, or just by simply answering questions asked by parents (Burke et al., 2019).

Furthermore, most advocates in their case were parents of children with special needs, so they were able to empathize with these families making parents more trusting of the advocates (Burke et al., 2019). Sharing their personal experiences with their clients' built trust and empathy, creating a great advocacy relationship between advocates and their families. Overall, advocates supported these families by encouraging them to ask questions, increasing the parent's communication with the school, and if needed, encouraging families to document issues with schools. They also provided support by preparing them for IEP meetings by helping them address concerns about the IEP process and attending IEP meetings. These advocates ensured families were well-educated on services, parent rights, and parent training. In most cases, the schools responded positively to these advocate/parent relationships.

On the other hand, Burke et al. (2019) found some schools were confrontational with advocates and parents, which was attributed to these advocates being knowledgeable and willing to advocate for their clients. In one day, the school was surprised because they did not expect the advocate's assertiveness, which resulted in the school trying to silence her, but the client would not allow that. According to the researchers,

participants reported having access to more services, along with the improvement in school experiences, student progress, and parent experiences (Burke et al., 2019). Undoubtedly, enhancing the efficiency of these parents' experiences by using these services for their children overall strengthens the transition process from high school to adulthood.

## TRANSITION PROCESS FROM SECONDARY EDUCATION TO ADULTHOOD

### **Student Involvement**

In Fact, IDEA mandates all schools to provide an IEP postsecondary plan for students with disabilities to help them transition into life after high school (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, OSERS, 2017). Nevertheless, prior research suggests that students amongst the autism, deaf-blindness, intellectual disability, and multiple disabilities spectrums mostly attend transition-planning meetings at school, but oftentimes rarely add input (OSERS, 2017). In order to create the most successful transition, it is important for these students to provide input during meetings when constructing these plans to ensure the plan is something they would actually be interested in. These transitions are more effective when students feel comfortable and excited with the plans being implemented. Having a special education advocate would help encourage these students to feel more comfortable with advocating for themselves. Long-term, these students would be more involved in the plans being made for their futures, overall creating a smoother, more enjoyable transition from secondary education to adulthood.

Importantly, research has shown that youth with intellectual disability and multiple disabilities receive less educational encouragement and are less likely to apply for colleges (OSERS, 2017). According to OSERS (2017), 76% of students with disabilities with an IEP are expected to enroll in colleges after high school, but only 50% actually do. With this in mind, some parents of students with disabilities have low educational expectations for their children, typically lower than the child's own expectations for their education. This lack of motivation tends to have a huge effect on the child's input on their transition as well because it leads to students feeling incapable of having a successful transition hindering their growth. Having a special education advocate is a great tool for students because they help to motivate students to achieve greater academically. This is even more true for students with lower-income rates. They

are expected to perform even lower, ultimately causing them to have a difficult transition from secondary education to life after high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

In fact, in high school there are a number of steps students can take in order to build self-advocacy skills and prepare for college. During the transition process, previous research has shown that students are encouraged to take interest in honors and higher performance courses to prepare them for college (OSERS, 2017). Students are encouraged to get involved in school and their communities, which helps them explore potential career interests. They are advised to frequently conduct meetings with their school counselors to set career goals, some being vocational and educational goals, programs of study, college requirements, including the admissions process and any standardized tests required for admission (OSERS, 2017). Lastly, it is important for students to actively participate in their IEP meetings to understand the transition plan for their future. Some students may not feel college is the best fit for them, in these cases helping with employment would be the next option. Having a special education advocate can help these students with finding resources to access information about different job opportunities.

With this in mind, special education advocates can help students and their families find community-based work experiences like internships and apprenticeships for the student. They can also help assist them in finding mentorships, paid employment, and the right career pathways. The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD) discusses the important values of a work experience, whether paid or unpaid (OSERS, 2017). Having work experience gives students the opportunity to acquire higher wages after graduating. Having a work experience where students could participate in occupational education and special education helps them advance into higher professional roles (OSERS, 2017). These work-related experiences help special education students to gain the skills needed to perform adequately in a professional work environment. Students are offered Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs to walk them through this process (OSERS, 2017). In some cases, students with disabilities miss out on so many of these resources because they do not have the right people there to help them advocate for themselves and their families. In so many ways special education students will benefit from special education advocates. Through future research, I hope to conduct a study to further examine the effects of having a special education advocate.

## **Michigan Rehabilitation Services**

In like manner, Michigan offers a service to special education students during their transition process to postsecondary education called Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS). This is a service recommended by special education teachers to students with disabilities to help them prepare for adulthood. The program helps students explore different careers by having them complete vocational assessments, participate in job shadows, try out specific jobs, and explore unique interests and talents (MRS, 2011). When transitioning from high school to higher education students are now in the process of advocating for themselves. In high school, the school districts are required to have an IEP where students get the services they need in order to have a positive transition. Once they have transitioned students need to be able to contact the “Disability Support Services (DSS), provide adequate documentation of their disability, make and keep appointments, identify their disability, talk about how their disability impacts their learning, and advocate for the accommodations that they need” (MRS, 2011, p. 4). Having these skills allow students to be able to advocate for themselves independently. They also need to be able to study independently, organize their work and take responsibility for their learning (MRS, 2011). Overall, MRS helps students to find the resources they need in order to prepare them for self-advocacy.

Before considering higher education, students must ensure they are skilled at these responsibilities. In some cases, students may not know exactly where they are with their ability to conduct these tasks and be efficient at them. That is where having a special education advocate comes into play; they can be that person to help these students figure these things out. In particular, there are 10 ways higher education and training are different from high school. The first way is the physical environment of the school. Postsecondary environments are more campus-styled, so classes are in different buildings. According to the MRS (2011), if a student needed access, they would need to communicate that to their university, to get accommodations. The student would also need to be mindful when selecting their classes because they would need to factor travel time into their schedule (MRS, 2011). The second way higher education and training are different from high school is by the support the student receives. Students get far more support in high school versus in college. Students must gain the skills to build relationships with their teachers in order to seek out the support needed to excel while in college (MRS, 2011). According to MRS (2011), students should feel comfortable with asking questions in class and taking advantage of their instructor’s office

hours in order to get the support they need. The next difference is the academic structure. Higher education classes often meet less frequently, but the time is longer. They may also meet later during the day (MRS, 2011). Another difference is the teachers between high school and college. Not all teachers are certified as special education teachers, but they all are willing to work with students with disabilities as long as they know the student's needs (MRS, 2011).

In addition, the learning styles are different. To actively learn, students rely more on taking notes, reading and listening to understanding, and they prepare themselves for class by completing readings and assignments (MRS, 2011). The academic atmosphere is another difference between high school and college. College is a more competitive environment where students have fewer assignments, exams, and extra credit compared to high school (MRS, 2011). The seventh difference is the tests and papers. Tests and papers in college are longer and more comprehensive. In college, students are provided with support resources like writing centers and tutoring services to help them write their papers and study for their exams (MRS, 2011). Another difference between high school and higher education is the responsibility. The student is solely responsible for their education in comparison to high school. Students have to know how to advocate for themselves. Professors and counselors at colleges and universities will not constantly remind students of assignments or check in to see if you completed them (MRS, 2011). Along with student stress levels, college students are more stressed due to these responsibilities and living away from family. Lastly, technology is different in college compared to high school. Technology in college is essential in order to complete assignments and stay on task with course catalogs.

According to MRS (2011), not only do students with disabilities have to adjust to the differences between high school and college, but they also need to properly prepare for college. For example, most four-year colleges and institutions require students to take admissions tests like the ACT and SAT. Students with disabilities who are interested in attending a four-year college are able to receive the appropriate accommodations in order to perform best considering their disability. In some cases, students may not strive to complete these tests because they do not feel "good enough" for college, or that they have the resources and accommodations. Students with disabilities are offered testing accommodations such as extended time or separate setting, translators or real-time captioning, assistive technology, note-taker assistance, special seating arrangement, textbooks on tape, large print books and enlarged handouts,

readers or “read out loud software”, and priority parking/elevator key at a college or institution (MRS, 2011). These many accommodations disabled students often do not know about. Special education advocates are there for children to get the help they need to seek these resources and accommodations. They help to prepare them for college and the ability to seek/self-advocate for the things they need in order to excel in college.

## PLANS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the future, I plan to conduct a qualitative study to investigate the effects a special education advocate can have on students’ transition from secondary education to postsecondary learning/living environments. This research will be a qualitative study conducted to investigate the effects a special education advocate can have on students’ transition from secondary education to postsecondary learning/living environments. I will partner with Cass Technical High School and Eastern Michigan University. After gaining consent, I will conduct interviews and surveys with students, staff, faculty, and parents from these two schools. The survey will measure sociodemographic variables (e.g., age, race, access to quality education, income, and family & social support). The interviews will assess the different qualities of life after secondary school for students with an advocate versus students without an advocate. The interviews will examine students’ preparation from advocates and family support for life after high school (e.g., college life, self-advocacy, and employment). I will analyze the disability advocates’ past cases in order to investigate their knowledge, effects, and relationships with the students and their families. This will help to determine overall how diligent a special needs advocate is in the preparation for a student’s self-advocacy and future endeavors.

## CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, students with learning disabilities are not gaining the resources and support they deserve, which hinders their ability to find jobs, attend colleges, etc. As time passes, special education advocates are needed more and more to help support students of special needs. The more special needs students fall behind due to lack of support the deeper the matter resulting in a harder turnaround for them. Some steps are being taken to help address these challenges, but there is a concern that not enough is being done to meet the needs of these vulnerable students. Additionally, there are racial inequalities within special education



placement according to the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA, 2020). Disproportionality in special education placement is a recurring issue within minority families for students who have disabilities. Ultimately, educators and policymakers are at the forefront of this issue. Often students of color are disproportionately secluded from access to greater education. They are subjected to being more disciplined and being placed in segregated settings in comparison to their Caucasian peers (LDA, 2020). The main conclusion that can be drawn is that special education advocates are needed to ensure success amongst students with disabilities, minorities especially, during their transition into adulthood. This literature review concentrated on (1) the effects disproportionality and socioeconomic status may have on children's postsecondary lifestyles, (2) assessed the role and selection process of an effective special education advocate and (3) gained insight into how pivotal advocate/client relationships are in supporting the child's transition into adulthood. Research shows minority groups, mainly African American students are disproportionately represented in special education rates. Consequently, creating a lack of self-esteem for some students causes more dropout rates and the likelihood of jail time. There are some current social welfare policies being created to prevent this, but not enough is being done. Special education advocates are professionals who work towards helping to fix some of these issues and to help add to these policies. Special education advocates are professionals who work towards helping to fix some of these issues and to help add to these policies. In fact, previous research has shown the many ways having a special education advocate benefits children and families of children with disabilities. Families tend to face different challenges with gaining support for their children and having a great partnership with their schools. Special education advocates are able to seek these resources for families, ultimately helping them to receive the best transitions from secondary education to adulthood. They help parents to understand special education laws, the IEP process, and parental rights. Special education advocates should be knowledgeable about special education laws, and communication skills, and have great relationships with their clients. When transitioning from high school to life after college special education advocates help students to find the resources to ensure the best transition. Some resources being, for example, MRS, a program that helps special education students with the preparation of life after high school. Whether college, or job opportunities an advocate will ensure these students are not being taken advantage of or discriminated against. In future research, I plan to conduct a qualitative study to investigate the effects a

special education advocate can have on students' transition from secondary education to postsecondary learning/living environments.

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