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## Avoiding the Services Cliff: An Extensive Look at Effective Strategies to Prepare Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders (asd) for Life and Work

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AVOIDING THE SERVICES CLIFF: AN EXTENSIVE LOOK AT EFFECTIVE  
STRATEGIES TO PREPARE STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASD)  
FOR LIFE AND WORK

A MASTER'S THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY  
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY  
DANIELLE M. CARTER

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

DECEMBER 2021

AVOIDING THE SERVICES CLIFF: AN EXTENSIVE LOOK AT EFFECTIVE  
STRATEGIES TO PREPARE STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASD)  
FOR LIFE AND WORK

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BETHEL UNIVERSITY

DECEMBER 2021

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## Abstract

A fundamental objective of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) is to safeguard that all students with disabilities have available to them a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) that affirms special education and related services designed to meet their individual needs and **prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living**. This thesis addresses evidence-based efforts to prepare students on the autism spectrum for life and work. It provides an overview of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) which includes; a definition, common challenges that students on the autism spectrum experience as they grow, and evidence-based strategies to address those challenges. If left unaddressed, students with ASD are often unprepared for independent living and vocational endeavors at the very time that their access to needed services and support comes to an end. This transitional ending to special education services is referred to or dubbed the “services cliff”.

Suppose we are to equip students on the autism spectrum to transition to adult life effectively. In that case, skills and experiences essential for the transition to adulthood should *inspire* the development of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals and objectives, not merely serve as an afterthought. While high schools and age 18-21 Transitions programs endeavor to support students with autism in preparing for independent living and employment, research shows that efforts must be made earlier and more consistently. This thesis concludes with a practical application website outline for parents whose children have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

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## Chapter I: Introduction

While the extent of autism differences, traits, strengths, and challenges varies significantly among individuals, this literature review will focus on the two criteria cited in the Fifth Edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5, 2013), that a person must meet to receive a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): 1) Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction, and 2) Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities **that are significant enough to impair social, occupational, or other functions** (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The characteristics and challenges accompanying these two autism criteria often negatively impact an individual's ability to form and maintain relationships, live independently, and find and keep a job. A 2015 National Autism Indicators Report by Drexel University (Roux et al. 2015) revealed that young people with autism are not thriving in any of the following: "working, continuing school, living independently, being a social member of a community, or staying healthy and safe" (A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015, p. 8).



**Figure 1: Excerpts from the 2015 National Autism Indicators Report by Drexel University**

(Roux et al. 2015)

Working	<p>58% of young adults on the autism spectrum worked for pay outside the home between high school and their early 20s – a rate far lower than young adults with other types of disabilities.</p> <p>Four in every ten young adults on the autism spectrum never worked for pay between high school and their early 20s.</p> <p>Those who got jobs tended to work part-time in low-wage jobs.</p>
Continuing School	<p>36% of young adults on the autism spectrum ever attended post-secondary education of any kind between high school and their early 20s, including 2-year or 4-year colleges or vocational education.</p>
Living Independently	<p>One in five young adults on the autism spectrum lived independently (away from parents without supervision) between high school and their early 20s.</p> <p>Far fewer young adults with autism ever lived independently after high school (19%) compared to over 60% of their peers with speech-language impairment or emotional disturbance and nearly 80% of those with learning disabilities.</p>
Being a Social Member of a Community	<p>Approximately one in four young adults with autism were socially isolated. They never saw or talked with friends and were never invited to social activities within the past year, according to the report.</p>
Staying Healthy and Safe	<p>Nearly half of young adults on the autism spectrum were victims of bullying during high school.</p> <p>Over one-quarter (27%) engaged in some type of wandering behavior in which they impulsively left a supervised situation, increasing their risk of becoming lost and going missing.</p>

The report describes that while many students with autism receive help and support with academics, speech-language, and occupational therapy via special education and an Individualized Education Program (IEP), that help and support often ends when the student graduates from high school. An IEP is a plan developed by specific school staff and parents to set learning goals and outline services the school district will provide to the child. It is a legal document that enacts the school's accountability under state and federal law. Once the student graduates from high school, the legal mandate for the school district to provide services to prepare the student for young adulthood comes to an end unless they decide to continue their public education in a 18-21 year old Transitional Education Program.

After high school, youth with disabilities and their families must apply for adult services within their state. To be eligible for state support, the young adult is often required to have an intellectual disability. According to the Drexel report, most youth with autism leaving high school do not have an intellectual disability. When PreK-12 special education services end, many people on the autism spectrum do not qualify for adult services. However, the deficits in social communication and social interaction negatively impact their abilities to form and maintain relationships, live independently, and find and keep a job. While federal special education law mandates that students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) put transition plans in place supporting postsecondary education, employment, and independent living skills, the report shows that only 58% of youth with autism had a transition plan in place by the federally required age, just 60% of parents participated in transition planning. Only one-third of autistic youth responding to the survey wanted to be involved in transition planning (A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015, p. 13).

Families of students with autism often panic at the thought of their students moving from high school into adulthood. As their access to services come to an end, families refer to a “services cliff” that youth with autism seem to step off of when they enter adulthood. “Their access to services and support drops off dramatically after high school, with too many having no help at all” (A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015 p. 8).

A 2019 longitudinal study (Laxman et al., 2019, p. 911-921) followed a large sample of students with autism spectrum disorder for 14 years, looking at special education services received before, during, and after high school. Their findings not only support the idea of a *services cliff* (sharp decline in special education services received after graduating high school) but found that many of the students followed by the study experienced a continuous loss of special education services received *during* high school.

### **Thesis Questions**

The following will be guiding questions in this literature review:

1. What are common traits and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that negatively impact one’s ability to transition from high school into young adulthood and successfully pursue postsecondary interests, live independently, and maintain a job?
2. Which, if any, interventions and strategies have proven successful in helping students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) develop skills necessary to transition from high school into young adulthood and successfully pursue postsecondary interests, live independently, and maintain a job?

**Key Terms and Definitions:** American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Individualized Transition Plan, Joint Attention, Maladaptive behaviors, Neurodivergent, Neurotypical, Social Communication, Supported Employment, Task Analysis.

- American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5): the standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals in the United States.
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): a complex developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behavior. While autism is considered a lifelong disorder, the degree of impairment in functioning because of these challenges varies between individuals with autism.
- Individualized Transition Plan: Part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a plan to facilitate the movement of students with disabilities from secondary school to adult life, to ensure that students are prepared at graduation to participate in postsecondary education, employment, and independent living
- Joint Attention: the ability to share focus on an object or area with another person. Examples of joint attention skills include following someone else's gaze or pointing a finger to look at something.
- Maladaptive behaviors: behaviors that stop someone from adapting to new or difficult situations.
- Neurodivergent: differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal (frequently used with reference to autistic spectrum disorders); not neurotypical.

- Neurotypical: a term used to describe individuals with typical neurological development or functioning.
- Social Communication: the ability to use both verbal and nonverbal communication appropriately in social situations
- Supported Employment: the availability and delivery of individualized supports in the workplace.
- Task Analysis: the process of breaking a skill down into smaller, more manageable components.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **Literature Search Procedures**

Once a research question was developed, this writer compiled a list of quality databases, books, journals, and articles available on the topics of Autism Spectrum Disorders, transitions from school to adulthood, and autism in the workplace. This writer then consulted with staff at Bethel's Academic Resource Center, interviewed field experts, and searched sites such as RefWorks and Google Scholar, using keywords such as *autism*, *transitions*, *enthusiasms*, and *employment*, to obtain articles from the databases. This researcher also utilized Bethel University Library, specifically the LibGuides section to identify articles for this literature review. In LibGuides, CLICsearch was used to search and identify articles relevant to the research. The search was limited to works from the past ten years.

### **Section 1: Defining Autism Spectrum Disorder, Traits, and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder**

#### **Defining Autism Spectrum Disorder**

According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) (2013), to receive a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a person must meet two criteria: 1) Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction, and 2) Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities that are significant enough to impair social, occupational, or other functions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

### **Traits and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder: Social Communication Deficits**

Children with deficits in social communication cannot use verbal and nonverbal communication appropriately in social situations. They may not understand how to use language to interact with another person or may not have developed language at all. Signs of these deficits can be recognized as early as infancy (Ozonoff et al., 2010). Neurotypical babies can recognize their parents' faces shortly after they are born. They may even coo or stop crying when they hear their parents' voices. A baby with autism may not have these characteristics.

Because babies on the autism spectrum often meet physical milestones such as sitting, crawling and walking, the lack of communicative behaviors is often overlooked for the first few years of life. However, social communication difficulties can lead to emotional and learning problems if left unaddressed (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

### **Traits and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder: Social Interaction Deficits**

Neurotypical infants seem to be prewired, based on a need to survive, with an immediate motivation and capacity to establish a social relationship with their caregivers. Neurotypical babies focus on voices and faces, and typical toddlers demonstrate "joint attention" with others in their lives to create shared experiences. For example, they might point to a dog or a car, looking from the object to the caregiver and back again, so they can enjoy the experience with their caregiver. Autism is a spectrum and not all individuals with ASD have the same social or cognitive challenges. Some individuals with ASD are not able to focus on the social world. Some do focus on the social world, but have difficulty interpreting what they see and hear.

Examples of deficits in social interaction in young children with autism may include trouble sharing or turn-taking, making eye contact, playing games and following rules, and being flexible to changes in schedule or environment. An older child with ASD may find it difficult to understand social situations or express interests and needs. Adults in the child's life may become frustrated at the lack of connection with the child.

### **Traits and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder: Restricted, Repetitive Behavior Patterns, Interests, or Activities**

Restricted, repetitive behavior patterns, interests, or activities in infants and toddlers are all characteristics of children with ASD and may look like a lack of interest to others. The lack of crying to get needs met, hand or finger-flapping, and rocking back-and-forth can be additional behavior traits. School-age children with ASD may have particular, perseverative interests, such as lining up toys, talking only about the same thing (i.e., ceiling fans) again and again, or repetitively opening and closing doors. These behaviors become problematic when manifested to the exclusion of engaging with other humans and the world.

While the extent of autism differences and traits varies significantly among individuals, they all impact an individual's ability to form and maintain relationships, live independently, and find and keep a job. Researchers at Drexel University use public health science and inform community and national policy to improve life outcomes for people on the autism spectrum. A 2015 report described a "services cliff that youth with autism step off of" when they enter adulthood. Their access to services and support "drops off dramatically after high school, with too many having no help at all" (A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University, 2015, p. 8).



## **Section 2: Interventions and Strategies That Have Proven Successful To Prepare Students With Autism For Independent Living, Postsecondary Education, And Employment**

### **Interventions and Strategies: Parent Observance and Responsiveness**

A review of several studies by Oono et al. (2013) revealed that early intervention implemented by parents of infants and children with autism could help children develop social communication skills. The studies varied in what parents were trained to do and for what length of time parents trained. Whether they received training individually with their child or in groups with other parents, all interventions focused on helping parents be observant and responsive when interacting with their infants and children. These parent interventions helped their children develop communication skills and showed improvements in outcomes such as increased language comprehension and expression, and a reduction in the severity of maladaptive autism characteristics, with a secondary result being an increase in parent self-confidence.

### **Interventions and Strategies: Social Skills Training**

Social Skills Training (Holton, 2016) may help those with autism learn and develop social skills. For this literature review, social skills will be defined as the ability to begin and sustain relationships with others. While some people with ASD seem to show no interest in social interactions, others may want to form relationships but do not know how to manage social situations. Regardless of how much social interaction young people with autism seem to want, research shows the ability to begin and sustain relationships correlates to emotional well-being.

Social Skills Training can look different based on age. Younger children learning social skills may focus on identifying emotions, greeting other group members, and sharing and taking turns. Tweens and teens learning social skills might focus on how to start a conversation and

continue the conversation by identifying the intentions of others and making connected comments. Others may focus on recognizing and responding to bullying behavior. Regardless of age, social skills training helps those with autism develop skills that can only be learned in a group and provides an immediate opportunity to put those skills to work (Holton, 2016).















### **Interventions and Strategies: Checklists and Task Analysis**

Authors of the text, *Autism and the Transition to Adulthood: Success beyond the Classroom* (Wehman et al., 2009), followed three different young people (Jeff, Craig, and Maria), citing their successes as participants of highly structured and organized transition programs. The authors repeatedly convey that while early intervention is essential, children with autism grow into young adults who want to work, go to college, and live as members of a community. They are young adults first and individuals with autism second, and that young adults need to experience competence to have healthy self-esteem and self-confidence. The authors maintain that competence in college/post-secondary school, work settings, home, and the community are best developed inside those real-life settings and not by participation in make-believe classroom exercises. Learning those skills can begin early and at home. A preschool-age child may benefit from a checklist or task analysis for getting ready each morning and evening. Each item on the list can be broken down further into its task list. For instance, a checklist/task analysis for brushing teeth might begin with the following tasks: 1. *Get your toothbrush case*, 2. *Unzip the case*, 3. *Take out your toothbrush...* and end with 14. *Rinse toothbrush under the water stream*, 15. *Turn the water off*, 16. *Shake water out of toothbrush*, 17. *Put the toothbrush back into the case*. Authors of the text contend that teaching life skills early and at home using

checklists/Task Analysis can help young children with autism grow into competent, confident young adults. Figure 2 (following) illustrates an example of a Task Analysis.

**Figure 2: Brushing Teeth Routine Task Analysis**

(Source: Autism Elementary-Teachers Pay Teachers 2021)

		Brushing my teeth 
		Squeeze toothpaste on toothbrush 
		Turn water on 
		Wet toothbrush 
		Brush teeth for two minutes 
		Spit toothpaste in sink. 
		Rinse out mouth 
		Finished 

©2019 ASD

### **Interventions and Strategies: Audio and Video Prompting**

While some (Wehman et al., 2009) maintained that students with autism need to be having real-life experiences to learn life and vocational skills, others (Chen et. al 2019) have found success using audio and video prompting (AP) technology. In the article, *Promoting Independence with Vocational Audio and Video Prompting for Students with ASD*, Chen et. al, (2019) cited that Audio and Video Prompting -- an evidenced-based practice -- can be used to teach not only life and vocational skills to students with disabilities, but is effective teaching behavior management as well.

With Audio and Video Prompting, students use portable audio or video medium such as an iPod, that delivers previously recorded verbal prompts to instruct a student's behavior. The verbal prompts outline each task the student needs to complete next. The student must complete each step of the task to be able to move on, but is able to pause and resume if better understanding is needed. Video Prompting goes a step further by visually modeling each step of the targeted skill in video format, accompanied by audio explanations, via tablet or smartphone. The student is again required to complete each step of the skill before moving to the next step.

Similar to the checklist/task analysis mentioned previously, Audio and Video Prompting address the challenges that many students with autism have independently completing tasks by breaking each skill into small, workable steps. The article attributes the success of Audio and Video Prompting to their portability and that they reduce the mental load or amount of work a student would have to put into remembering each step of a given skill. In addition, the use of audio or video to ensure successful independent task completion reduces the stigma of receiving constant prompting from a job coach or another adult, especially in a competitive work setting.

Along with acquiring skills, Audio and Video Prompting are effective in helping students with disabilities to generalize skills across settings and maintain skills once they are mastered.

Checklists, Task Analysis, and Audio and Video Prompting are all examples of *explicit and direct instruction* and presume the students have adequate vision and hearing abilities and possess both gross and fine motor skills.

### **Interventions and Strategies: Preparing for Post-Secondary Education**

As previously stated, children with ASD can experience greater social communication difficulties and repetitive and restrictive interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) than neurotypical students, and that explicit and direct instruction beginning early and at home and focused on life and vocational skills can help improve outcomes for students with ASD as they grow from children to adolescents and from adolescents to young adults.

Adolescence is a tumultuous time for all humans, whether neurotypical or neurodivergent. Students with ASD portray specific challenges due to social communication challenges and perseverative interests, making it difficult to identify realistic, achievable, postsecondary goals. For example, a high school student with ASD may be perseverating about becoming a YouTube Personality, and may be unwilling to consider other potential vocations.

Additionally, students with ASD may present varied academic and behavioral skills. One student on the spectrum may present a high ability to decode words/read but a low ability to understand/comprehend what is read. Another student on the spectrum may have difficulty working in groups but may excel at standardized tests.

A special education team at Lakeview High School (Szidon et. al., 2015) focused its building-level professional development for an entire year on addressing the complex needs of students with ASD, and produced *Five Steps for Developing Effective Transition Plans for High*

*School Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Szidon et al., 2015.) The team used data from students' transition assessments to determine postsecondary goals, then went a step further to also determine the skills the students' would need to be successful in those environments and worked to ensure the students left high school with those skills. The authors found it imperative to have measurable IEP goals linked to measurable postsecondary goals, and continuously monitor for generalization of skills, evaluate for progress, and adjust goals accordingly. The Lakeview team found that creating transition activities to support postsecondary goals, linking those goals with the annual IEP, and continuously monitoring for progress, led to improved postsecondary successes for their students.

### **Interventions and Strategies: Preparing for Employment**

(Barnett 2020) indicated that approximately 4 out of 5 adults or 80% of college-educated adults on the autism spectrum are either unemployed or underemployed, working at jobs beneath their education and income level. This unemployment and underemployment affect both the economy and the social and emotional health of the (potential) employees with autism.

In her Tedx Talk, Clair Barnett, Autism self-advocate and Communications Coordinator of Vanderbilt University's Frist Center for Autism and Innovation, outlines steps employers can take to address autistic unemployment to improve their inclusive hiring/employment practices and their profitability. Given the current employee shortage, improving these practices will likely benefit both employers and employees with autism. Barnett revealed that attitudes toward and awareness of autism are changing, which means there is hope for people with autism to gain equal access to employment.

The Frist Center for Autism and Innovation at Vanderbilt University (2018) focused on just that using what they call “The Nashville Model.” Using Best Practices, “The Nashville Model” begins with Skills Testing, then Job Placement, and assesses the need for and provides Assistive Technologies and Appropriate Management Methods to help ensure employee success. Once the adult or young adult with Autism finds a Meaningful Occupation, The Frist Center continues with the final step of “The Nashville Model,” which is Post-employment Monitoring to ensure employees have the support and training they need. All of the steps are implemented using a strengths-based approach, focusing on the skills and abilities specific to each employee.

While The Frist Center uses The Nashville Model to help people with autism to find purposeful employment, what makes it unique is the way it does so. The Nashville Model identifies obstacles that people with autism experience during the job search and interview process, and works with community members and potential employers to develop programs to overcome those challenges. Each program developed is examined for its potential to have an impact on job searchers with autism and the bottom line of the potential employers. Once a program has been scrutinized and deemed successful, it is added to The Nashville Model and can be replicated anywhere (Vanderbilt University, 2021).

### Chapter III: Application of Research

The saying goes “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” Traits, characteristics, strengths and challenges differ from person-to-person. As a result, support and service needs vary immensely and continually change as individuals with autism age. For the purpose of this thesis, I’ve created the outline of a potential website for parents of children diagnosed with autism, to serve as a kind of “command central” of resources specific to preparing their young people for life and meaningful work. Ideally, the site would be facilitated and maintained by parents and young adults in the autism community, who can add or delete helpful resources as they are found.

<b>Resources for Minnesota parents, caregivers, and members of the autism community</b>	
Staying Healthy and Safe	<p>Links to Social Stories and role-play videos regarding personal hygiene, body awareness, personal safety, making connected comments, bullying prevention, and what to do if you get lost or separated and need help</p> <p>Links to therapists and support groups specific to autism</p>
Continuing School	<p>Links to interests and skills assessments, transitions programs</p> <p>Links to the disability office contacts of MN 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities</p> <p>Links to scholarships and waivers specific to autism</p>



Being a Social Member of a Community	<p>Links with contact information and date/time info. to interest-related clubs for young adults such as Disney, Lego, Harry Potter, Star Wars, Marvel</p> <p>Links to Social Stories and role-play videos re: maintaining healthy friendships, making connected comments, staying safe while maintaining relationships</p>
Working	Links to interests and skills assessments, transitions programs, vocational rehabilitation services, potential employers and job notices
Living Independently	Links to transitions programs, group homes, rent assistance and waiver programs, supportive living programs

## Chapter IV: Discussion and Conclusion

### Summary of Literature, Limitations of Research, Implications for Future Research, Personal Perspective, Professional Application, and Conclusion

#### Summary of Literature

My literature review is based on the following questions: What are common traits and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that negatively impact one's ability to transition from high school into young adulthood and successfully pursue postsecondary interests, live independently, and maintain a job? Which, if any, interventions and strategies have proven successful in helping students with ASD to develop skills necessary to transition from high school into young adulthood and successfully pursue postsecondary interests, live independently, and maintain a job?

In section 1, I define autism spectrum disorder according to the two criteria cited in the Fifth Edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5, 2013), that a person must meet to receive a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): 1) Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction, and 2) Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities **that are significant enough to impair social, occupational, or other functions** (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), a definition supported by research. I go on to cite examples of ASD traits and characteristics and how they may negatively impact a person's ability to pursue post-secondary education, live independently, and pursue and maintain employment.

In section two, I outline a number of interventions and strategies that have proven successful to prepare students with autism for independent living, postsecondary education, and employment. Some of the most promising are 1) Social Skills Training, 2) Checklists and Task Analysis, and Audio and Video Prompting.

Specific to preparing for post-secondary education, a special education team at Lakeview High School (Szidon et. al., 2015) focused its building-level professional development for an entire year on addressing the complex needs of students with ASD. The team used data from students' transition assessments to determine postsecondary goals, then went a step further to also determine the skills the students' would need to be successful in those environments and worked to ensure the students left high school with those skills. The team found that creating transition activities to support postsecondary goals, linking those goals with the annual IEP, and continuously monitoring for progress, led to improved postsecondary successes for their students.

A remarkable find regarding preparing for employment came from The Frist Center at Vanderbilt University. Scholars at The Frist Center have developed The Nashville Model to help people with autism to find purposeful employment. The Nashville Model identifies obstacles that people with autism experience during the job search and interview process, and works with community members and potential employers to develop programs to overcome those challenges. Each program developed is examined for its potential to have an impact on job searchers with autism as well as the bottom line of the potential employers. Once a program has been scrutinized and deemed successful, it is added to The Nashville Model and can be replicated anywhere (Vanderbilt University, 2021).

### **Limitations of Research**

One of the first limitations I encountered was the lack of research-based scholarly journal articles specific to preparing young people with autism for life after high school. While it is legally mandated that a transition plan be in place for high school graduates with disabilities, the reality is even if there is a plan in place, it is often not implemented. To address this limitation, I relied on anecdotal evidence from my own experience as a special education transitions teacher, text books from my licensure program, and finally from attending webinars and meeting with people in the field of transitions:

Friday, October 8th, 2021: PACER Webinar -- Inspiring Possibilities: Living, Learning and Working After High School

Friday, October 15th, 2021: MDE Postsecondary Transition Specialist, Lindsey Horowitz, interview (lindsey.jo.horowitz@state.mn.us)

Monday, October 25th, 2021: Mahtomedi *Passages* Transitions Program site visit and Stacy Triplat interview

### **Implications for Future Research**

In terms of future research, it would be helpful to see more evidence-based research on the effectiveness of interventions and programs specific to people with autism in regard to forming and maintaining relationships, living independently, and finding and keeping meaningful work.

### **Personal Perspective**

The first time I heard slang terms such as “transitions cliff” and “graduating to your parents’ couch” was as a special education transitions teacher, working with 18-21-year-old students on the autism spectrum, at a charter school specific to autism. I learned that while the

law required students to have a plan for transitioning to independent living, employment, and post-secondary education, that plan was not always in place and not always implemented. I grew passionate about transitions and autism and learning about innovative and successful interventions and programs to help young people with autism to be successful in life and in work.

### **Professional Application**

While I am not currently employed in the field of transitions, I have an Autism/Special Education Teacher license, and the knowledge I've gained from this thesis project remains top of mind as I work with K-5 special education students. Additionally, I will soon begin a work-based learning endorsement program through St. Cloud State University. I will utilize the knowledge I gained regarding preparing students with autism for employment from the literature I reviewed from The Frist Center at Vanderbilt University to develop work-based learning programming.

### **Conclusion**

When I consider whether my literature review answered the questions: What are common traits and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that negatively impact one's ability to transition from high school into young adulthood and successfully pursue postsecondary interests, live independently, and maintain a job? And Which, if any, interventions and strategies have proven successful in helping students with ASD to develop skills necessary to transition from high school into young adulthood and successfully pursue postsecondary interests, live independently, and maintain a job?, I am able to cite a number of findings and results.

I learned that there are interventions that parents are able to utilize long before their infant receives an autism diagnosis. I discovered that social skills training for people with autism can be an effective intervention to address all three major transitions focuses: independent living (specifically forming and maintaining relationships), pursuing post-secondary education, and securing and maintaining meaningful employment.

I learned that a major university is using science to create and evaluate programming, identifying obstacles that people with autism experience during the job search and interview process, and that works with community members and potential employers to develop programs to overcome those challenges.

Finally, I created an outline for a website for parents of children with autism, citing resources around challenges presented by the 2015 National Autism Indicators Report by Drexel University: working, continuing school, living independently, socializing and participating in the community, and staying healthy and safe. The plan is for the website to be maintained by parents and members of the autism community, a bit like Wikipedia, to help youth with autism to avoid stepping off of a services cliff.

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