PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO PREPARE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED SECONDARY STUDENTS FOR EMPLOYMENT: AN EMBEDDED CASE STUDY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

People who are blind or visually impaired have experienced employment rates of around 30% for decades despite legislation to improve educational outcomes and ban discrimination in employment. It is imperative to study existing comprehensive programs for these students and to understand leadership roles which provide support and lead to continuous improvement of educational opportunities and preparation for employment. This qualitative, embedded case study explored systems in place at one specialized school for the blind. The study examined experiences of educational leaders as their school strove to provide instructional programming which would impact outcomes. It also examined perceptions of current students and graduates, staff, and employers who partnered in the school’s programs. Social capital and social networking provided the theoretical framework of the study. Data were collected through 26 semi-structured interviews with educational leaders, staff, students, graduates, and employers; site observations in school settings, work placements, and community settings; and review of documents. Data were then analyzed through an inductive and deductive coding process.

Findings revealed that educational leaders of this school have high expectations for student achievement and remain focused on improving instructional opportunities, aligning their actions with the school strategic plan. The traditional school-year program has a primary focus of core curriculum and the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) which is specifically designed to meet the unique instructional needs of students who are blind or visually impaired. Two separate programs at the school focus on employment preparation. One is a student work experience program during the school year and another is a 4-week outreach program in the summer. Both programs include classroom components and real job experiences. All of the graduates indicted
they utilized skills they gained in the student work experience program and in SETE when job seeking and in their careers.

Findings further indicate that rigid state mandates regarding course requirements and graduation timelines severely limited time available in student schedules for instruction in areas of ECC associated with employment outcomes, and with real life employment experiences. In an effort to serve the highly specialized needs of these blind and visually impaired students while meeting state mandates, instructional programs spanned the entire calendar year, not just the traditional 9-month school year. In addition, findings indicate negative attitudes of employers impact opportunities for employment. Recommendations for educational leaders include: inform policy makers of the unique instructional needs of students who are blind or visually impaired, continue to search for and provide employment experiences and instruction in the ECC within and outside of the school schedule, provide students direct instruction about the value and function of social networks, and develop educational materials about hiring blind employees for potential employers. Future research could include investigating the social networks of people who are blind and visually impaired, and also attitudes of employers along any existing interventions with employers.
To my family
Acknowledgments

I want to thank each individual participant of this study. During this research I met so many sincere, interesting, full of life individuals. Every one of them was the kind of person you later remember and think “I wish I could work with that person every day!” My life is certainly richer because of our interactions. I also want to thank my advisor Anjale’ Welton for her commitment. I appreciate your patience and for the time and knowledge you shared. Thank you to my dissertation committee members for your time and guidance. Most of all I wish to thank my husband and the rest of my family who supported me through this journey.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

An employment rate of 30% is a staggering statistic most would consider unimaginable and unacceptable. Yet people who are blind or visually impaired experience an unemployment rate around 70% compared to a rate around 30% for the general population (Bell, 2010; Erickson, Lee, & Von Schrader, 2012). The reality of an employment rate of this low is confounding considering there is federal legislation that specifically addresses educational rights of students with disabilities and prohibits discrimination in employment for persons with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) requires the development of an individualized educational plan (IEP) for students with disabilities which identifies educational needs or deficits and planned interventions. Beginning at least by age 16 the IEP must include purposeful planning for transition to adult life, including personalized goals for higher education or training, employment and independent living and it must document instruction, interventions and supports in place to progress toward these goals. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 prohibits discrimination in hiring based on disability and establishes guidelines and requirements for employers to provide reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities. IDEA and ADA are comprehensive laws specifically designed to promote equity and reduce discrimination for people with disabilities. Despite these regulations, people who are blind or visually impaired continue to be profoundly underrepresented in the workforce. The United States Department of Labor reported in 2011 the rate of employment for all people with disabilities was 33.4% compared to a rate of 75.6% for nondisabled persons (Erickson et al., 2007). For people who are visually impaired the glaring gap in employment rates has remained persistent for decades (Bell, 2010; Bell & Mino, 2013).
National education initiatives the past few decades have focused on preparing all students to have the necessary skills to be ready for college or a career when they complete high school. Core academic areas of English/language arts and mathematics have been emphasized and K-12 schools have increased the number of courses in these core academic areas required for graduation in an effort to prepare all students to be ready for the demands of both college and a career. There is some disagreement among authorities if the skills required to prepare students for college and the skills required to prepare them for a career are the same or different but there is overwhelming agreement that both college and career require a firm foundation in these core academic content areas (Camara, n.d.; Conley & McGaughy, 2012).

Research has shown that children who are blind or visually impaired typically learn differently than their sighted peers and therefore require specialized instructional techniques and services. A major component in the education of most children who are blind or visually impaired is instruction in areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) which includes nine skill areas identified to be imperative in the education of people who are blind or visually impaired. The ECC content areas include compensatory or functional academic skills such as Braille, orientation and mobility, social interaction skills, independent living skills, recreation and leisure skills, career education, use of assistive technology, sensory efficiency skills, and self-determination. All nine skill areas relate either directly or indirectly to the development of skills associated with employment. For most students who are blind or visually impaired their educational programs need to include instruction simultaneously in both common core subject areas and the expanded core curriculum areas. In fact, efficient educational programs for students who are blind or visually impaired need to address core curriculum, expanded core curriculum, related services, and transition services in order to have the greatest opportunity to impact
development of skills related to employment outcomes (Hatlen, 1996; Lohmeier, Blankenship, and Hatlen, 2009; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010; Wolffe & Kelly, 2011).

This work focused on a specialized school for the blind and the educational programs in place aimed to prepare students for employment. Specialized schools for the blind are distinctive educational settings in that they provide an array of highly specialized educational services and supports in a continuous manner in one physical location. The study explored the overall educational programs in place during the traditional 9-month school year, and also focused on an embedded case that is a well-established, intensive four week program designed to teach and reinforce employability skills in real life on-the-job training experiences.

**Statement of the Problem**

Employment is considered a significant life activity and is used as a measure of quality of life. People who are excluded from employment are often forced to rely on government income programs, frequently live in poverty, have limited access to healthcare, and report lower ratings on other areas of quality of life scales (Wehman, 2011; Wolf-Branigin, Schuyler, & White, 2007). In light of the low employment rate for people who are blind or visually impaired additional attention should be given to educational programs that specialize in preparing these students with skills to be career ready. Residential schools for the blind and visually impaired provide specialized educational programs for this population of students; however a review of the literature revealed limited research on these programs and their impact. The review of literature also revealed a lack of research on the experiences of current students or graduates who have attended these specialized programs as well as the educational leaders who are responsible for them.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how one specialized school for the blind is preparing students for post-school employment. The study examined the programs and systems in place designed to prepare students for employment and the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders including graduates and employers who participated in the programs. Furthermore, it examined educational leaders’ influence in developing and sustaining systems designed to impact employment outcomes. Features of the school’s regular 9-month educational programming were examined to explore what components were offered during a typical school year cycle. Another part of the study examined a well-established intensive four week summer program designed to teach and reinforce employability skills in real life, on the job training experiences. Findings from the study will inform educational leaders about influencing programs, and will inform the field of programs designed to improve employment skills of students who are blind or visually impaired.

This study will help fill a void in the research. The focus on an existing program including an exemplary collaborative program focused entirely on employment skills, the influence and challenges of educational leaders, the experiences of current students and graduates as they navigated the employment process, and the perspective of engaged employers will provide empirical evidence from a viewpoint that has not been previously examined. Having a better understanding of specific systems in place, the experiences of educational leaders and the individual stories of job seeking and employment experiences of graduates can inform school leaders who in turn can influence programs serving students who are blind or visually impaired. Schools are responsible for preparing students for college and careers.
School leaders need empirical evidence to refer to when reviewing and evaluating current programs, to justify new initiatives, and in order to influence change as appropriate.

**Research Questions**

This study addressed the following questions:

1. What systems do specialized schools for the blind have in place to prepare students for post-school employment?

2. What are the experiences and observations of educational leaders and individuals who worked with students through an educational, rehabilitation, or employment perspective?

3. What are the job search and employment experiences of graduates who are blind/visually impaired and where do they perceive they learned these skills?

4. What are the implications and challenges for educational leaders when evaluating programs, developing curriculum, and influencing programs or individualized education?

**Limitations**

“Limitations are factors that may affect the results of the study and are generally beyond the control of the researcher” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 75). They may be considered potential weaknesses of a study.

Limitations of the study include:

1. One limitation is related to generalizability of single case study. Single case study design was a proper fit for this study aimed at an in-depth exploration of a particular example of an existing program. Though the findings may not have statistical generalizability to a larger population, they will inform the field of meaningful and applicable information and examine the lived experiences of individuals who engaged in the program.

2. Another limitation was that interview data were collected only from participants who were available during data collection period during the four week summer employment program. The responses of this limited group does not reflect the responses of every staff, current and former student, and employer involved in the educational programs at the school.

3. Additionally the majority of data in this study was interviews and it was assumed that participants answered fully and honestly.
Delimitations

Delimitations of a work are related to the parameters the researcher has established such as the specific case or participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The delimitations of this study include the following.

1. The study was confined to one specialized school for the blind located in an urban setting.

2. The study was confined to programs and systems in place related to preparation for employment and employment skills.

Theoretical Framework

Educational attainment, employment status, interpersonal social relationships and social network connections can all impact employment outcomes. They are all components of various types of personal social capital which theoretically influence an individual’s current and future interactions and experiences (Coleman, 1988; Farr, 2004; Lin, 1999). Edwards (2006) stated that social capital results from social relationships and is fundamentally related to other forms of capital including “human (skills and qualifications), economic (wealth), cultural (modes of thinking) and symbolic (prestige and personal qualities” (para.1). These various forms of capital exist and function within networks which have been recognized as a factor in providing connections to important life opportunities including higher education, job leads, and employment (Farr, 2004; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1998). Because this study focused on employment, disability, and acquired skills, the frameworks of social capital and social network theory provide a backdrop. This study also rested firmly on the educational curriculum for children who are blind or visually impaired known as the Expanded Core Curriculum, which recognizes these students require unique instructional methods and intentional instruction in blindness specific areas in addition to those of their sighted peers.
Overview of Methodology

This dissertation presents a qualitative study with an embedded case study design. According to Hancock and Algozzine (2006), case studies “are intensive analyses and descriptions of a single unit or system bounded by space and time” (p. 11). They are often used in studies involving individuals, programs, or marginalized groups such as people with disabilities (Creswell, 2014). Data for this dissertation were collected thorough an in-depth review of the policies, programs, curriculum, and systems to foster employment skills, and through semi-structured interviews with school leaders, current staff, students, graduates, and employers. In order to protect the anonymity of participants pseudonyms are used throughout for people, programs, place and other identifiable information. At the conclusion of this study readers will have a comprehensive understanding of systems in place at this school designed to develop employment related skills, perspectives of stakeholders who work and learn in these programs, job seeking and employment experiences of graduates, and the influence and experiences of educational leaders in arranging and supporting the structures necessary to maintain and expand instructional opportunities.

Significance of the Study

The employment rate for adults who are blind or visually impaired has remained around 37% for decades. This research is significant because it provides a deeper understanding of systems in place at one specialized school for the blind to prepare these students for post-school employment. There is limited literature regarding existing programs that address employment skills for this group of individuals and much of the available works used quantitative methods based on secondary analysis of data from nationwide databases. This study seeks to add empirical evidence to the existing literature by exploring educational systems designed to
prepare students who are blind or visually impaired for transition into post-school employment and by examining firsthand experiences of individuals who participated in the program as they maneuvered through the steps of becoming employed. A deeper understanding of the topic can provide guidance for educational leaders as they make curriculum and program decisions, and in turn effective programs can result in improved employment outcomes. It is the responsibility of educational leaders to understand valuable components of programming. They have the ability to influence policy makers as well as local programming and curriculum, and inform educators and stakeholders. Effective educational programs can have a tremendous influence on post-school employment outcomes (Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone, 2003; Conners, Curtis, Emerson, & Dormitorio, 2014). Higher employment rates result in less poverty, better access to healthcare, and improve overall quality of life as well as have a positive influence on both the individual and society at large.

Dissertation Organization

This dissertation includes six chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the study and includes a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 contains a summary of a review of the literature on employment circumstances and job-seeking experiences of people who are blind or VI, college-and career-readiness, the ECC, and how educational leaders influence educational programming. Additionally this chapter includes a review of social capital and social network theory which along with the ECC provide a framework for the study. Chapter 3 includes an overview of the methodological approach, the research design of this case study, and an explanation of data collection and data analysis procedures. Chapters 4 and 5 present findings from the overall case
and the embedded case respectively. Chapter 6 then presents a summary of findings, conclusions, and a discussion of implications.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Decades of education reforms have aimed for increased student achievement, improved preparation for post-secondary education and careers, and increased accountability of schools in an effort to improve outcomes for all students. Regardless of these reforms there has been little change in employment outcomes for people who are blind. This review of literature begins with an examination of historical and current employment circumstances of individuals who are blind or visually impaired to demonstrate the seriousness of the problem and the critical need for research surrounding this issue. Included is an overview of the data sources on employment rates utilized in many studies. Research on specific factors associated with employment and unemployment of individuals who are blind and visually impaired are discussed along with the methods individuals reported they utilized to get a job, and factors that may impact job seeking behaviors and employment.

Next, a discussion of College and Career Readiness (CCR) is included to review what experts identify as knowledge and skills required to be prepared for post-secondary education and careers. Exactly where students with disabilities are situated in the CCR and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) frameworks and literature is analyzed. Additionally there is an examination of employability skills and job seeking skills such as various definitions and models, and consideration of whether these are included in CCSS.

In order to establish context the focus then turns to the specific educational needs of students who are blind or visually impaired. This section includes a historical background on the education of these students. It also contains a background of the Expanded Core Curriculum for students who are blind or visually impaired (ECC) and explains the importance of direct
instruction in the nine areas of that curriculum. The ECC is an integral part of the framework of this study due to its overwhelming significance to the development of basic educational and lifelong skills for students who are blind or visually impaired.

The subsequent section presents an analysis of literature on school leaders’ influence on educational programming. There is a growing body of literature about the influence principals and superintendents have on student achievement through practices such as establishing a vision, having high expectations, supporting teacher professional development, and being involved with curriculum. Educational reforms have resulted in administrators having increasingly more responsibility to the achievement of all students including students with disabilities. Literature related to the influence of educational leaders on achievement of students with disabilities was explored as well as literature about leaders’ knowledge and training for this responsibility.

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the highly specialized educational needs of students who are blind and visually impaired to prepare them for college and a career, and the influence educational leaders can have on student achievement and outcomes through effective practices. Emergent themes explored are: (a) employment rates remain extremely low for decades during which educational reforms occurred, (b) from their inception, educational reforms need to take into account the needs of students with disabilities, (c) instruction in two simultaneous curricula is required for students who are blind and visually impaired: the CCSS and the ECC, (d) educational leaders influence student achievement for all student groups, with similar specifically names actions, and (e) educational reforms reinforce educational leaders’ responsibility to all students including those with low-incidence disabilities such as blindness.
Employment Circumstances of People Who are Blind or Visually Impaired

Data sources—employment. Statistics on the labor force are available from various sources. Five sources of data frequently cited in the literature used in this paper include: Current Population Survey, American Community Survey, Rehabilitation Services Administration, National Longitudinal Transition Study, and National Longitudinal Study-2. Each of these sources are described in this section including the guiding or governing agency, data collection methods, types of information, and location of data.

The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) collects and analyzes data on local, state, and national employment rates. The website www.bls.gov has statistics on employment, inflation, pay and benefits, and numerous related topics. This information is collected through a monthly survey called the Current Population Survey (CPS). The survey uses a set of six broadly stated questions to identify whether the respondent has a disability and one of these questions determines if a person is blind or visually impaired (United States Department of Labor, 2015). The numerous sets of data on the website must be interpreted carefully and caution must be used when comparing data sets from different years because of variations in survey questions in different years. It is also important to consider the data is collected through survey format and is therefore self-reported.

Another rich source of nationwide statistics for a broad array of topics is the American Community Survey (ACS) which is mandatory survey which samples a small percentage of the population annually. Erickson, Lee, and Von Schrader (2012) described the ACS as “a census Bureau survey that has replaced the Decennial Census long form” (p. 2). Among the topics covered by the ACS is the employment status of people with disabilities. The CPS and ACS both generate data from random sampling of the general population of the United States.
Employment rates specific to people with disabilities are documented in various other repositories. One of these is the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) data system which is a collection of statistics from vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies nationwide. VR assists thousands of citizens age 16 to 64 with disabilities become employed through the provision of a host of services, a few of which include: providing transition services for high school students, training and education, career counseling, and personalized supports. Longitudinal data is collected annually and includes information on employment outcomes disaggregated by specific type of disability. The RSA dataset is maintained by the U.S. Department of Education on their website where it is available for researchers upon request.

Additional data specific to students with disabilities was generated from two nationwide longitudinal studies commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) each consists of data collected over different two time frames spanning a total of 20 years. Data from NLTS were collected from 1985 through 1993 and data from NLTS2 was collected from 2001 to 2009. The NLTS2 website includes data on: demographics of secondary students and their families; educational experiences of secondary students including academic, related services, and extracurricular activities; post-school experiences including adult services and social activities; post-secondary education and employment outcomes; and identification of school and post-school factors that contribute to positive outcomes. The more recent NTLS2 consisted of data collected from 2000 through 2009 on a nationally representative sample of 12,000 13-16 year-old students who received special education services. The sample included 501 local education agencies and 38 “state-supported special schools that served primarily students with hearing and vision impairments and multiple
disabilities” (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d., NLTS2 Sampling, Data Collection, and Analysis Procedures section, para. 1). The NLTS2 utilized a survey format and respondents included students, their families, teachers, and administrators. Data were collected at numerous intervals over the ten year time period so student participants were around 26 years old and well into young adulthood by the final phase of the study. As stated earlier, consideration should be given when reviewing survey data that the information was self-reported by participants.

The five sources of data described in this section provide empirical information on employment that represents the general population, all disability categories, and subgroups with specific disabilities including blindness and visual impairment. This group of sources provides nationally representative data which is both historic and recent, and is longitudinal as well as single event. It is representative of individuals age 16-64. Some of the surveys and studies utilize random sampling for participants while others utilize enrollment lists of individuals receiving services in schools or service agencies. The next section reviews literature based on analyses of data from these sources which offer statistical and descriptive evidence on employment rates for various groups of people.

**Employment rates.** Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute published reports on the status of people with disabilities based on data from the ACS. These reports included rates of employment for those with a disability compared to those without a disability and across disability categories. In 2011 Disability Status Report: United States (Erickson et al., 2012) the authors reported an employment rate of 33.4% for those with a disability compared to an employment rate of 75.6% among those without a disability, a gap of 42.2 percentage points. The report indicated the employment rate for the group of people who are blind or visually impaired was 36.8%. Reports based on ACS have limitations associated with data collected
through survey method and can be affected by sample size. Erickson et al. state the 2011 data is reported at a 90% confidence level.

Data from BLS were utilized in a report, which at first glance appeared to report contradictory results of much greater rates of employment for people who were blind or visually impaired. After further investigation of BLS survey questions and statistical formulas it was determined that the employment rates reported by BLS were determined differently than other sources. One particular report from the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) analyzed data from BLS and provided a detailed report of unemployment rates for individuals who are visually impaired. AFB explained how BLS data can be misinterpreted or misleading. For instance, statistics provided by BLS was derived from only 44% of the entire sample of visually impaired respondents because it included only those who identified themselves as in the labor force. Whether a person was situated in the labor force was determined by an affirmative response to one survey question that inquired if the participant had been actively seeking employment in the past two weeks. Of those 44% of visually impaired respondents considered, the unemployment rate was 13.4%. However, the AFB stated the employment-population ratio which was 37.7% according to 2010 BLS was a more accurate reflection of employment rates for the group. The employment-population measure was determined by dividing “the approximately 5 million people with a disability that were employed into the approximately 26 million people identified with a disability” (Interpreting Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Data, 2017, para.15).

Limitations of the AFB report include factors related to secondary analysis of data as well as those related to survey research, variations among survey questions from different years, and sample size.
Literature which utilized data from RSA data reported employment rates similar to those reported in studies that utilized data from ACS and BLS. Bell (2010) investigated RSA data from 1997 through 2007 analyzing the employment rates of VR customers who were legally blind. He found that overall both rates of employment and wages improved slightly for the group. Indeed the number of blind or visually impaired customers who reportedly became competitively employed through VR services increased around 10% over the time frame up to 37% in 2007. However he also discovered the total number of blind or visually impaired customers served by the agency had decreased from 18,596 in 1997 to 14,276 in 2007 which is around a 30% difference. Bell concluded that “61 percent of consumers who came to the VR process unemployed exited the system without obtaining an employment outcome” (p. 113). In another study Bell and Mino (2013) analyzed RSA data and reported around 37% of people who were blind were employed. Both of these studies arrived at similar employment rates as the employment-population rate of 37.7% reported in the 2010 BLS report mentioned previously.

Some studies focused on youth transitioning into post-secondary education and employment utilized data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Kelly & Smith, 2008; Newman et al., 2011; Sanford et al., 2011; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). One of numerous categories of data collection for both NLTS and NLTS2 related to employment experiences. Blackorby and Wagner (1996) analyzed data from the first NLTS which represented all disability groups of youth out of high school up to five years. They reported 29% of young adults were competitively employed at some point during the previous five years. Higher employment rates were reported from the 2009 Wave 5 data of the NLTS2 by Newman et al. (2011). These authors reported that 60% of young adults in all disability categories combined
were employed at the time of the survey and that 91% reported having been employed at some point during the eight years since high school. For the subgroup of youth with visual impairments the findings indicated 43.8% were employed at the time of the interview (compared to 60% for all disability groups combined) and 78% had been employed at some point since high school (compared to 91% for all disability groups combined). When considering these results it is imperative to note that the definition of the term *engagement* utilized on the survey was broader for the NLTS2 survey; defined as “all forms of employment, not just competitive employment, and includes job training as a productive form of preparation for work” (Newman et al., 2011, p. xvii). Even though the NLTS2 used a broader definition of engagement which included job training, data continued to be collected separately for each specific activity. Due to this broader definition of engagement existing literature may utilize data based solely on employment or combine it with other activities included in engagement, so caution must be taken when comparing data and research based on NLTS to research based on NLTS2.

The studies reviewed utilized different sources of data sets including ACS, BLS, RSA, NLTS and NLTS2 (Table 1) and spanned more than 25 years. Similar employment rates were reported across the studies with a range from 29% to 43%. Throughout the literature the most common rate of employment reported for this group was around 37%. Employment rates for people who are blind or visually impaired are historically and persistently well below employment rates experienced by the general population. In order to have a better understanding of these rates it is essential to examine existing research that has investigated the circumstances of those who are employed. Therefore the next section provides a review of literature that investigates factors and characteristics associated with employment for blind and visually impaired individuals.
Table 1

*Comparison of Data on Employment Statistics from Literature Review*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors, date</th>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Date data collected</th>
<th>% Employment rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erickson et al., 2012</td>
<td>ACS</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Foundation for the Blind [AFB], 2014</td>
<td>BLS</td>
<td>Monthly since 2008</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell, 2010</td>
<td>RSA</td>
<td>1997 to 2007</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackorby &amp; Wagner, 1996</td>
<td>NLTS</td>
<td>1987, 1990</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell &amp; Nino, 2013</td>
<td>Primary data from survey</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Factors associated with employment.** Perpetually low rates of employment for individuals who are blind and visually impaired have existed for decades even with the passage of legislation aimed at reducing discrimination and requiring accessibility and reasonable accommodations in the workplace. Despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 which prohibited discrimination in hiring, the glaring gap in employment rates has remained persistent over decades for people who are blind and visually impaired (Bell, 2010; Bell & Mino, 2013; Darensbourg, 2013; Houtenville & Conway, 2008). There is a limited amount of literature that speaks directly to the conditions associated with successful employment outcomes for people who are blind or visually impaired. Some research has focused on factors common among those who are unemployed and factors common among those who are employed. Factors commonly associated with individuals who were unemployed include negative attitudes of employers, lack of access to print (lack of skills to utilize assistive
technology or read Braille or lack of assistive technology devices to make print accessible), and transportation barriers (live in area with no public transportation or lack the skills to travel independently) (Crudden, Sansing, & Butler, 2005; McDonnall, 2011; Shaw, Gold, & Wolffe, 2007). Factors identified as barriers in the job-search process included small (social) networks to rely on for job leads, and lack of computer and assistive technology skills (Williams, 2008).

Factors associated with individuals who were blind or visually impaired who were employed included previous work experience, self-determination (the ability to make informed choices), locus of control (belief that one is in control of their own behavior and future), academic competence, use of assistive technology, completion of a post-secondary education program, independent travel skills, and peer social skills (Conners, Curtis, Emerson, & Dormitorio, 2014; Fields, 2004; McDonnall, 2011; McDonnall & Crudden, 2009). Other factors common among those individuals who were employed included more frequent socializing with a greater number of people, wider and denser networks, supportive families and greater use of online communication than those who were not employed (Kelly & Wolffe, 2012; Roy, Dimigen, & Taylor, 1998). In an analysis of VR consumers who were blind or visually impaired, Darenbourg (2013) found a higher rate of employment for those who entered services through self-referral. McDonnell (2009) identified a related factor was locus of control.

In their analysis of factors associated with employment of transition age youth McDonnall and Crudden (2011) found “the relationship between higher reading levels and employment was one of the strongest of all the variables” (p. 337). Additionally, Bell and Mino (2013) reported that educational attainment had a significant relationship with employment outcomes, and higher college degrees were associated with incrementally higher employment rates: baccalaureate degree—employed at 59%; master’s degree—65%; and law or doctoral
degree—80% employment rate. It is no surprise that research findings indicated a connection between strong academic achievements, higher levels of education, and improved employment outcome rates. However, in addition to the general academics there is definitive evidence that specialized skills associated with blindness and low vision – specifically those taught in the ECC – are associated with improved employment outcomes.

**K-12 Education**

Considering the link between strong academic skills and employment outcomes of students who are blind the review of literature next investigated where students with disabilities are situated in recent educational reforms and whether employment skills are generally included in common frameworks for school curriculum. Schools are after all responsible for preparing all students with the skills to be successful in post-secondary training or college and a career. CCSS are a nationally recognized framework used by many schools when developing and aligning curriculum, therefore these were reviewed.

**College and career readiness.** National education initiatives have focused on preparing all students to be college and career ready when they complete high school. The college- and career-readiness emphasis was fueled by data on the percentage of students entering college who had to take remedial courses or did not complete college, and on input from industry leaders that students were entering the workplace without the skills necessary to be productive and successful. Educational reform policies and practices related to the college and career readiness initiative include state and federal accountability measures, development and implementation of the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), and various grant opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Achieve, a non-profit education reform organization defines college and
career readiness as follows: “college and career readiness means that a high school graduate has
the knowledge and skills in English and mathematics necessary to qualify for and succeed in
entry-level, credit-bearing postsecondary coursework without the need for remediation”
(Camara, n.d., para. 2). The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers
(PARCC), one of two national consortiums tasked with developing and implementing
assessments to measure student progress offers this definition:

A student who is determined to be College- and Career-Ready through performance on
the PARCC high school assessments is one who has demonstrated the academic
knowledge, skills, and practices in ELA/literacy or mathematics necessary to enter
directly into and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing courses in those content areas in
programs leading to a credential or degree which may be aligned to the student’s career
aspirations, from two- and four-year public institutions of higher education. PARCC will
make College- and Career-Ready Determinations in ELA/literacy and in mathematics,
(Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. 2012, p. 2)

Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards were developed to
delineate the essential knowledge and skills necessary for students to be college and career
ready. CCSS were developed in collaboration with educators and experts, based on researched
best practices and trends, with the goal of preparing students to “succeed in entry-level careers,
introductory academic college courses, and workforce training programs” (Common Core
Standards Initiative, 2018, para. 5). These standards were developed in two phases. The college-
and career-readiness standards were developed first, K-12 standards next, then the two were
merged Two multistate consortias, PARCC and Smarter Balanced, have developed assessments
aligned to the CCSS in order to determine if a student is prepared for college or a career-training
program. CCSS are comprised of learning standards for math and English language arts.

CCSS and students with disabilities. The CCSS and aligned assessments apply to
general curriculum which should be available to all students including the subgroup of students
with disabilities. In spite of the heterogeneity of this group of learners the Common Core State
Standards Initiative website had minimal information pertaining to application of the standards for this diverse subgroup of students. There was a brief statement in the Frequently Asked Questions section that reinforced the commitment to high expectations and recognized that the methods used to ensure the standards are met may differ based on individual student needs. There was also a statement about students with severe cognitive impairments which included a reminder to retain rigor and high expectations. Other than these brief comments the site had a link to a document titled *Application to Students with Disabilities* which referenced IDEA assuring the rights of students with disabilities to access to the general education curriculum along with the individualized supports and related services identified by the IEP team. In this document the heterogeneity of this subgroup of students was recognized along with an acknowledgement of the need for research based instructional practices for students with special needs. Needs for supports and accommodations were directly addressed in three broad points: individualized supports and related services, IEP, and qualified teachers and personnel. Other recommendations included use of principles of Universal Design for Learning, instructional accommodations, and assistive technology as potential supports. In summary there are not specific guidelines contained in the CCSS in terms of application of the standards to the greatly varying needs of a students including those with disabilities (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2011).

Unfortunately, despite the CCSS containing acknowledgement of the needs of students with disabilities for accommodations and reference to federal law requiring accommodations be provided, the PARCC consortium failed to include in their development and production timelines plans to produce paper (braille) or online versions of the practice tests that would be accessible to blind students at the same time the other versions of the test were released. In 2014
a lawsuit filed by the National Federation of the Blind and parents of a blind student pointed out the potential violation of ADA. A settlement was reached that included the test producer Pearson developing test versions with accessibility features and consulting with NFB to ensure future tests have accessible formats released at the same time as all versions. The spring 2014 PARCC practice tests included some accessibility features but not all, and Pearson continued to work with consultants and NFB to improve accessibility of the test (Education Week, 2014).

**College v. career ready.** Researchers have questioned whether being prepared for college requires the same skills as being prepared for a career. In the article *College and Career Readiness: Same or Different?* (Conley & McGaughy, 2012) recalled that for decades students who were planning to go to college took completely different courses than those not planning to further their education after high school but planning instead to join the work force. At one time career readiness was referred to as job training, and later vocational education. In some instances school districts had two separate schools for each group. However, as our country and the economy evolved, new kinds of jobs emerged and many of them required some level of academic, communication, and technology skills. This shift meant that both those students going to college and those seeking training for a career required many of the same skills so there was no longer an obvious distinction between the two. A 2006 report compared the skills necessary for jobs that required some vocational training or on-the-job experience but did not require a bachelor’s degree to the skills necessary for college readiness. It reported many commonalities between the two in areas of reading and math. The report strongly recommends holding all students to high academic expectations in the core areas of reading and math, conducting annual assessments to evaluate student progress, and holding schools and states accountable for student progress (Camara, n.d.).
From a slightly different perspective, some literature describes different skills required for college compared to those required for careers. Conley and McGaughy (2012) summarized a series of studies in which they compared the skills required for general education college courses required for a bachelor’s degree to those skills required for courses in career certificate and associate’s degree programs. The findings indicated skills focusing on speaking and listening, reading informational texts, writing in a variety of genres, and problem solving were important in all of the course areas. However, “the specific applicable English and math content standards varied considerably by course area in both the academic and career-oriented courses” (Conley & McGaughy, 2012, p. 31). The authors concluded that both college- and career-readiness required skills including study skills, time-management, persistence, and ownership of learning along with many problem solving strategies of formulating problems, collecting information, interpreting and analyzing information and communicating in a variety of formats. Again the exact knowledge and skills varied greatly based on the field of study or certificate program. The article suggested that though it is convenient to “declare that college readiness and career readiness are one and the same, evidence suggests it’s more complicated than that” (Conley & McGaughy, 2012, p. 33).

**College and Career Ready Model.** Setting aside rhetoric, the consensus is that schools should be preparing students with skills which prepare them for success after graduation whether that is entry into a post-secondary education setting or a career. Stone and Lewis (2012) reviewed college and career reform results and concluded the following: decades of increasing graduation requirements have not resulted in proportional increases in assessment results; increasing emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) related college degrees has prepared proportionally more graduates than available jobs; and the dropout
rate has not improved drastically in response to reforms. The authors recognized there is
diversity in student learning styles, interests, and post-secondary goals, and being a productive
adult including having a successful career does not always include attending college. They agree
that the means to both college and career readiness include “high standards and expectations,
rigorous courses aligned with standards, and tests to ensure that students are meeting those
standards” (Stone & Lewis, p. 14). They suggest a framework that includes three types of skills
required in order to be career ready: academic knowledge including “math and science to solve
real workplace problems”; employability skills such as “responsibility, self-management, and
integrity”; and technical skills “unique to specific occupations” (p. 15). Advocating a sound base
of academic skills they argue the importance of meeting the needs and interests of all students
including those who do not learn well in typical academic settings or do not desire to attend
college.

**Employability Skills and Job-seeking Skills**

Employability skills have been referred to as soft skills, workforce readiness skills, job
readiness skills, and other names. They have been a topic of interest in the realm of business as
well as education for years and identified as necessary but lacking. As a result there have been
numerous frameworks and guidelines developed over the past few decades to provide
information and guidance aimed at better addressing key skill areas to increase employment
skills of graduating youth which directly benefits the youth and their families, business, and
communities. A 1991 report by the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills
(SCANS) delineated foundation skills considered essential for all jobs. Not surprisingly the
report indicated that workers need a solid academic foundation, especially in reading and math,
and they also need reasoning and problem solving skills to apply their knowledge as well as
social emotional skills related to basic communication and interactions. Identified skills were divided into three categories: academic, thinking, and personal qualities. Additionally the report identified five workplace competencies which include: “the ability to manage resources, to work amicably and productively with others, to acquire and use information, to master complex systems, and to work with a variety of technologies” (SCANS, 1992, p. 6). More recently the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a national advocacy group comprised of government, education, and businesses encouraged collaboration between schools, communities, and other stakeholders in order to provide current and meaningful educational programs and opportunities to youth which ultimately prepare them for a career and skills to adapt to industry shifts and career changes (P21 Partnership for 21st Century Learning, n.d.). In 2014 the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education unveiled the Employability Skills framework. Similar to the SCANS report, this framework is organized into three categories: applied knowledge, effective relationships, and workplace skills. Within the three categories of the Employability Skills Framework are nine key skills areas and in a comparison to CCSS and the Common Career Technical Core, five of the nine skills were identified in the former and eight were identified in the latter (Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, n.d.). When compared to the ECC for students who are blind or visually impaired, at six of the nine areas of the Employability Skills Framework are directly correlated to skills in the ECC. Over time the identified skills in various frameworks have remained relatively the same. These examples which define and organize employability skills have many commonalities such as emphasis on reading, writing, math, and speaking skills, problem solving and team skills, and social interaction skills – among others.
Job-seeking skills specifically are pivotal in the journey to employment; but what exactly are they? Called by other names including job search skills, employment seeking skills, employability skills, or similar terms, job-seeking skills encompass multiple components. Lists of specific skills differ across sources however they most commonly include career awareness and exploration, self-awareness, skills related to locating job opportunities in various formats such as print newspapers or on-line sources, networking with others to learn about jobs, preparing a résumé, filling out applications, interview skills, following up after interviews, and job retention skills.

Where skills are situated in K-12 curriculum frameworks. When reviewing the CCSS to determine if specific skills are included it must be considered that these standards “can effectively help students develop a range of critical skills, but they do not cover every skill standard because they were designed specifically to cover academic knowledge and skills in math and ELA” (Blosveren & Achieve, 2012, p. 15). Blosveren and Achieve (2012) state that whereas the knowledge delineated in the CCSS is clear, the skills contained within the standards are less apparent. In order to have a better understanding of the types and range of skills manifested in the CCSS, an analysis was conducted comparing them to two sets of benchmarks: the Deeper Learning Standards promoted by the Hewlett Foundation designed to promote deep understanding, problem solving, and critical thinking skills; and the Career Cluster Essential Knowledge and Skills Statements developed by the National Association of State Directors of Career and Technical Education Consortium designed to promote knowledge and skills. The final report concluded that skills fit into one of four established categories: (a) those largely reflected in the CCSS, (b) those requiring an academic foundation based on the skills reflected in the CCSS but with technical skills not contained in the scope of the CCSS, (c) those that are not
explicitly included in the CCSS but could be reflected in instruction that is aligned to the CCSS, and (d) skills not reflected/included in the CCSS (Blosveren, K., & Achieve, 2012).

Employability skills fall into the category of skills that are not explicitly included in these standards but could be incorporated into curriculum which is aligned to CCSS. Job-seeking skills defined by Blosveren and Achieve (2012) as “research, applying, interviewing, maintaining a career portfolio, etc.” (p. 10) were not explicitly covered in the CCSS; however much of the academic foundation required to perform these skills are reflected in the standards. For example, researching to learn about careers or to search for a job could be aligned to writing standards for grades 9-10 which addresses conducting short- and long-term research to answer questions or solve a problem. Learning and practicing interview skills could be aligned to speaking and listening standards. Whereas the CCSS do not include standards specifically on job-seeking skills, they do include standards to which they can be aligned.

**Employability and job seeking skills of individuals who are visually impaired.** Few researchers have investigated job-seeking skills and experiences of people who are blind or visually impaired. A study by Lawson (2010) examined positive adult outcomes focusing on eight essential skills related to adult outcomes, one of which was job seeking skills. The 28 participants in this study were individuals who were blind or visually impaired and were currently employed. Those with low vision rated their skills higher than those who were totally blind. People who had worked at least five years rated themselves higher than those who had been employed less. Of the eight essential skill areas, participants rated their aptitude for job-seeking skills the lowest. There was a statistically significant relationship between job-seeking skills and attendance at a structured independent living skills program provided by an agency that specializes in service for blind and visually impaired children and adults (Lawson).
In a survey study investigating employment experiences of 231 young adults who were blind or visually impaired Shaw et al. (2007) reported that 71% were not working at the time of the study. Of those who were not working 37% reported they were actively looking for work. When asked how much time per day they spent looking for work, 78% answered they spent one hour or less per day on average, and 26% indicated they had not submitted any applications in the past year. The authors speculated the small amount of time reported in job-seeking may have been due to participants not understanding the breadth of the term *actively seeking work* to include internet and job list searches or it may have been a result of being discouraged with the job-search process. Indeed, self-efficacy or the belief in one’s ability to be successful is often stronger early in the job-seeking process and can wane over time resulting in the job-seeker becoming discouraged (Hergenrather et al., 2008; Jans, Kaye, & Jones, 2012).

There are service agencies including state-operated and private employment services, VR offices, college career centers, and a multitude of online websites and courses where youth and adults with disabilities can seek assistance developing skills and tools related to employment. Some of the services targeted for broad audiences include dissemination of information about resume writing and methods of locating available jobs. Additionally, some agencies offer highly individualized services such as assessment, training, referrals to additional service agencies, and various supports in the employment process (Lawson, 2010; Osborn, Dikel, Sampson, & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2011; Williams, 2008). Although it is fortunate that so many services and resources exist for jobseekers, it is not clear how many people are aware of them or can access them. A question on the NLTS2 survey inquired about the job seeking strategies respondents utilized. Response options consisted of broad categories:

*How did you find this job? Please mark (X) ALL that apply.*
- You got the job yourself.
- You used an employment agency or other service program.
- Someone at school helped you.
- A family member helped you.
- A friend or someone else you know helped you (e.g., a neighbor, a friend of a family member) (NLTS2 Youth Survey 2007, 2007, p. 12).

Results indicated only 14.3% of participants who identified as having a visual impairment responded that they had help from an employment agency or service program. The majority (50.4%) indicated they found their most recent job on their own, 7% indicated they had help from their school, 13.4% from a family member, and 17.5% from a friend or someone else.

Another survey of Americans with disabilities inquired of 18 to 64-year-old employed participants how they acquired their job (Figure 1). Only 20% of respondents indicated they used job placement assistance from a school, private, or government agency. These studies indicated that one-fifth or less of people with disabilities who were employed utilized job placement agencies, and that around 70% indicated they got their job through contacts in their social network including friends and informal networks (Harris Interactive, 2010).
One of the largest government supported services designed specifically to support individuals with disabilities in seeking, preparing for, and securing employment is vocational rehabilitation services. Giesen and Cavenaugh (2012) stated, “the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program, administered by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), is the largest employment program for adolescents and young adults with visual impairments” (p. 475). Unfortunately, the authors note that for customers with a visual impairment, of 2,000 VR case

Figure 1: Item from *Survey of Employment of Americans with Disabilities*. Retrieved July 26, 2015 from http://nod.org/research_publications/
closures annually less than half result in full- or part-time employment in an integrated setting earning at least minimum wage.

Even though some service providers offered assistance to customers in developing employment and job seeking skills, qualitative studies have indicated that people with disabilities do not always find the resources helpful. A study of One-Stop Career Centers in Kansas which included people who were blind or visually impaired found that participants who felt they needed support with job search activities expressed they received little or no assistance at the centers (Hall & Parker, 2005). At the university level Williams (2008) reported on college seniors’ experiences with job searches through the career services center. Two of the eight participants in this study were blind. Overall the participants indicated they did not feel the career service center at the college was helpful in identifying job leads or assisting with their job search. Several of the participants in this study reported they conducted the job search independently on the internet.

In summary, people with disabilities including those who are blind or visually impaired reported or demonstrated they have deficits in employability skills and job-seeking skills. Decades of literature supports the need for direct instruction in career education for all students, and career education including employability skills are specifically identified as one of the nine areas of the ECC for students who are blind or visually impaired. A large portion of this group indicated they did not utilize government services when seeking employment and some who sought services through One Stop Centers and university career centers expressed experiencing little to no assistance or benefit. The importance of possessing employability skills, job seeking skills, and social skills cannot be understated considering the large percentage of people who reported they found employment on their own including thorough contacts in their social networks.
Education of Students Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired

Historically in the United States, and in fact worldwide, students who were blind did not attend school at all. They were either taken care of at home or sent to an almshouse. In the early 1800’s some states began educating these children in specialized residential schools and by 1837 Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were home to schools for the blind, and other states followed suit. In their inception in the 1800s schools for the blind frequently offered basic academics and focused heavily on vocational training. In these early decades there was little to no access to Braille textbooks nor were there formally established teacher training programs. Several major events had a positive impact on the education of blind students. By the 1900s the Braille code became utilized nearly universally, teacher preparatory programs were established in several states, and there was a greater societal emphasis on education in general. With increased and standardized knowledge and teacher training, services for students who were blind and visually impaired began to improve in all settings. As early as 1900 it is recorded that a public school in Ohio had a class for blind students. Around the mid 1950’s a few more local public schools began including children who were blind or visually impaired. In some instances these programs provided the highly specialized education these students needed, and in other cases the students merely sat in a classroom of non-disabled peers or in a self-contained classroom amongst students with other disabilities (Sacks & Silberman, 1998).

In 1968 notable legislation called The Handicapped Children’s Early Education Assistance Act created a framework for early intervention services for children who were visually impaired and had additional disabilities. Though limited early intervention services were already available this act drove the establishment of comprehensive programming. The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 which was subsequently re-
authorized several times and eventually evolved to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) brought about notable changes in the education of students with disabilities including blind children. Among many important things, this law required schools to educate all children, to do so by developing individualized plans, and requiring the receive their education in an appropriate setting; referred to as the least restrictive setting (Enerstvedt, 1996; Nordstrom, 1986; Sacks & Silberman). IDEA legislation requires that schools provide a continuum of educational placement options. Education in a general education classroom in the student’s home school should always be considered but it is not the least restrictive environment for every child. In cases where a student’s educational needs cannot be met in that setting there must be other options and schools for the blind are one option on the continuum.

Programs at schools for the blind have evolved over time to meet the needs of students and families while maintaining compliance to legislation, adherence to standards, and continuing to promote research and development of best practice instructional methods. As opposed to the historical image of being a permanent institutional residential placement where students are sent for education and training and remain until they are adults, todays schools for the blind are a placement option for students with a wide range of abilities and needs, providing academic instruction and specialized services in a variety of program options and formats and for varying amounts of time. McMahon (1994) found that 30% of students attending schools for the blind were “day students” meaning they attended the schools during the day and lived at home rather than at the school as a “residential student.” He also reported that overall, “a visually impaired student attended a residential school for an average of 5.5 years and a blind multihandicapped child attended for an average of 9.4 years” (p. 167). Also, of the 33 schools in the study the majority reported providing opportunities for academic and recreation activities with non-
disabled peers. These specialized schools provide many programs in addition to the standard 9-month day and residential school year. Most provide outreach services which include direct services to students placed in general education settings, short-term one week to one semester programs which offer intensive instruction in one or two blindness specific skills, specialized instruction in areas including assistive technology and orientation and mobility, educational evaluations, and even online distance learning for core academic classes (Schaffhauser, 2012). Many schools for the blind also provide statewide opportunities for staff development training in the way of direct consultation and in-service training. An interesting note is that 100% of the schools surveyed reported providing pre-service teacher training placements and 95% reported participation in research activities sponsored by university, foundations, or government, with curricula, equipment, software, and instructional materials (McMahon, 2014). The shift from providing primarily a campus-based program to providing widespread outreach services has been quite drastic over the past twenty years.

Advantages frequently listed when considering specialized schools for the blind include a concentration of highly specialized staff, concentration and continual immersion in academics as well as instruction in blindness skills or ECC, greater and more immediate access to specialized instructional materials and assistive technology, facilitation of in-service training, students experiencing less isolation and a greater sense of belonging, and increased opportunities to participate in organized student leadership and sports. Potential disadvantages listed include great travel distances from home to school, separation from family during the week for residential students, and generally less contact with non-disabled peers (McMahon 1994, 2014). Due to the diversity of programs, options of residential or day programming as well as short programs and opportunities for integration into programs with nondisabled peers McMahon
(1994) suggested “these programs would more accurately be described as intensive school environments that can adapt individual programs to the level of integration that is appropriate for each child” (p. 170). He further states that rather than residential schools they may be more aptly named “specialized schools for the blind with residential options” (p. 170).

**Unique educational needs of students who are blind and visually impaired.** Much of the teaching and learning that occurs in a typical classroom is visually based and in fact children acquire a great deal of skills as a result of simply watching the goings on in their surroundings. The most basic of concepts such as how to interact with one’s environment by reaching and touching, raising a hand to be called on, playing with peers, hanging up a coat and book bag on a hook, opening a milk carton, and endless other typical actions must be intentionally taught through specialized techniques to a student who is blind. Academic instruction also requires very specialized teaching techniques and supports. One basic example is every day instructional materials including textbooks in any format including print or electronic. Textbooks and print instructional materials must be provided to every student in their individual learning media whether that is braille, large print, auditory or some combination of these formats. Equipment and instructional materials used to supplement instruction (rulers, scales, graphs, videos, etc.) must also be accessible with braille or appropriate tactual markers, descriptions based on approved guidelines, and a multitude of other accommodations. Many students also require assistive technology equipment to access the learning environment. Keep in mind they must receive instruction in how to use this equipment in order to benefit from it. From onset of visual impairment to the time they exit high school students who are blind and visually impaired require a wide variety of accommodations, adaptations and highly specialized disability specific instruction from professionals who are trained specifically to work with them.
The National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual Impairments, Including Those Who Have Multiple Disabilities (Corn, Hatlen, Huebner, Ryan, & Siller, 1995) identified key topics in the education of blind and visually impaired students. The first version of this National Agenda included eight goals however over time two additional goals were added so there are now 10 (Figure 2; Lohmeier, Blankenship, & Hatlen, 2009; Ringwalt, 2013). The goals address urgent issues in the education of students who are visually impaired including early intervention, accessibility of programs and other safeguards under IDEA, sufficient availability of professionals in the field and available professional development, assurance that students will receive services from trained vision experts who will serve a caseload based on intensity of student needs, inclusion of ECC based on assessment results, and thorough transition services.

| Goal 1 | Students and their families will be referred to an appropriate education program within 30 days of identification of a suspected visual impairment. Teachers of students with visual impairments and orientation and mobility (O&M) instructors will provide appropriate quality services. |
| Goal 2 | Policies and procedures will be implemented to ensure the right of all parents to full participation and equal partnership in the education process. |
| Goal 3 | Universities with a minimum of one full-time faculty member in the area of visual impairment will prepare a sufficient number of teachers and orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists for students with visual impairments to meet personnel needs throughout the country. |
| Goal 4 | Caseloads will be determined based on the assessed needs of students. |
| Goal 5 | Local education programs will ensure that all students have access to a full array of service delivery options. |
| Goal 6 | All assessments and evaluations of students will be conducted by or in partnership with personnel having expertise in the education of students with visual impairments and their parents. |

Goal 7—Access to developmental and educational services will include an assurance that textbooks and instructional materials are available to students in the appropriate media and at the same time as their sighted peers.

Goal 8—All educational goals and instruction will address the academic and expanded core curricula based on the assessed needs of each student with visual impairments.

Goal 9—Transition services will address developmental and educational needs (birth through high school) to assist students and their families in setting goals and implementing strategies through the life continuum commensurate with the students' aptitudes, interests, and abilities.

Goal 10—To improve students' learning, service providers will engage in ongoing local, state, and national professional development.

**Expanded Core Curriculum: History and Reasoning**

Goal 8 of the National Agenda indicates that every visually impaired student should be assessed in the areas of both the academic and expanded core curricula and receive instruction in both areas based on the results of that assessment. One of the premises supporting the ECC is that merely accessing and completing the core content academic areas identified for all students is not sufficient for most students who are blind or visually impaired. These students require an additional curriculum designed to address essential knowledge and skills that are unique to people with visual impairments. Experts in the field agree on the importance of instruction in both traditional academic areas and the ECC (Hatlen, 1996; Lohmeier, 2005; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010). Lohmeier (2005) stated that the skills in the ECC “should be taught both in support of the core curriculum and in addition to the core curriculum, because they are so specific to the disability of blindness” (p. 127). The nine areas of the ECC and a brief description of each area appear in Table 2 below. The importance of instruction in these areas cannot be overemphasized. Children who are blind and visually impaired, including those with additional
disabilities, need instruction in these nine areas in order to be successful in school, the community, and the workplace (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010).

Table 2

**The Expanded Core Curriculum**

<table>
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<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| Compensatory / Functional skills to access the general curriculum | A. Literacy skills: braille, handwriting, abacus, low-vision devices, object symbols  
B. Communication including alternate systems such as tactile or object systems  
C. Specialized instruction: methods to represent spatial, environmental, body concepts, and concepts including those too large / small or dangerous to be directly experienced                                                                 |
| Sensory efficiency                              | Systematic instruction in visual, tactual, and auditory skills                                                                                                                                               |
| Orientation and mobility                        | Safe and efficient travel throughout one’s environment.                                                                                                                                                     |
| Social interaction skills                       | Visual impairment can result in social isolation, may affect the ability to interpret non-verbal social cues, and this can impact personal life and future employment                                               |
| Assistive technology                            | High- and low- tech strategies provide access to general curriculum, communication, and instruction at the same time as non-disabled peers                                                                          |
| Independent living skills                       | Systematic instruction related to managing: personal (hygiene, appearance, etc.), financial, or home management                                                                                               |
| Recreation and leisure skills                   | Intentional exposure to leisure activities and hobbies and potential accommodations since this may not happen incidentally                                                                               |
| Career Education                                | Structured instruction about career options and requisite skills                                                                                                                                            |
| Self-determination                              | Instruction in the development of decision-making, self-advocacy, and responsibility                                                                                                                       |

After reviewing the nine areas of the ECC the relevance of the comment about these skills being taught both in support of and in addition to core curriculum is clearer. Many of these
skills align directly to general curricular areas of English language arts, reading, basic academics, and technology. It is also apparent that almost all of the areas of the ECC are related to those very factors related to employment mentioned previously in this chapter. However they must be taught using systematic purposeful methods with accommodations and adaptations based on the needs of the individual child. More importantly they must be taught by vision professionals who are certified to teach them (Bruce, Ferrell, & Luckner, 2016; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010).

In spite of the documented significance of assessment and instruction in the ECC literature suggests that it is not occurring regularly. The most common reasons cited for not including instruction in ECC include an overwhelming focus on core curriculum with no time for or integration of other skills, not enough time in the school day due to already full student schedules, large student caseloads that limit teachers’ time, and inadequate assessment materials. Professionals report finding opportunities to teach ECC skills during time outside the traditional school day and school year such as before and after the school day, extended school-year programs, or summer school (Agran, Hong, & Blankenship, 2007; Huebner, Merk-Adam, Stryker, Wolffe, 2004; Lohmeier, Blankenship, & Hatlen, 2009; Sapp & Hatlen 2010). How do we ensure we are meeting student needs and in fact their rights to receive instruction in the ECC? In part it is the responsibility of the teacher of visual impairments and in part it is the responsibility of administrators.

**Educational Leaders’ Influence on Educational Programming**

Research in educational leadership over the past decades resulted in numerous studies examining what if any influence school leaders have on a variety of factors including academic achievement, curriculum, instruction and program development, and staff development. Indeed, many researchers concluded that educational administrators at both the building level and district
level have an influence on educational programs resulting in improved student achievement (Gamage, Adams, & McCormack, 2009; Hough, 2014; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Studies suggested that the influence of educational leaders is profound, accounting for up to one-fourth of combined direct and indirect effects on student learning, and some suggested it is second only to direct classroom instruction (Gamage et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, 2008; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, Anderson 2010). When educational leaders effectively fulfill their responsibilities, they play a valuable role in improving student achievement and outcomes.

How school leaders influence student achievement. A review of literature revealed several recurring themes associated with how educational leaders influence student achievement. One of the leading themes centered on establishing direction. The main similarities across studies reflected the importance of including district and building leaders as well as the Board of Education in developing a vision that is shared with staff and stakeholders and which remains the focus in all school activities and decisions (Agular-Nuno, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Similarly, goal setting and monitoring was a recurrent theme associated with student achievement. This included the setting of schoolwide goals, five year goals, and non-negotiable student achievement goals. Clearly articulated goals provide a common direction and purpose for all staff and stakeholders. A continuing focus on goals must be led by school leaders demonstrated by their actions and communications with staff and stakeholders (Leithwood et al., 2004; Mart, 2011; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Studies also showed that school leaders impacted student achievement through the provision of resources to support and implement professional development for teachers. Supporting professional development included providing fiscal, material, and human resources
needed for staff development, purchase of professional or instructional materials, software, equipment and related needs. At times leaders may have to be innovative or make hard choices in order to direct funding to professional development. Other times they may not need funding for professional development but instead provide resources such as release time or common planning periods. Supporting professional development was one of the most common responses listed by superintendents when asked to describe what strategies they use to raise student achievement (Aguilar-Nuno, 2012). It is not effective for only the administrator to have knowledge of current best practices related to instruction, curriculum, and goal monitoring. Educational leaders must invest in teachers and staff by providing training and development opportunities. By improving teaching we increase opportunities for student growth (Gamage et al., 2009; Hitt & Tucker 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Some other factors associated with educational leaders’ influence on student achievement were: engaging external partners, principals’ efficacy, engagement in curriculum development, having high expectations and purposeful monitoring. Administrators need to engage with the community to inform them, for feedback, and promote their involvement and encourage their contributions. Efficacy refers to principals having confidence in their leadership and is impacted by support from the district level in the way of human and fiscal resources, encouraging external relationships, being allowed flexibility in pursuing goals, the required use of data-driven decision making and assistance with the process, autonomy in staffing decisions at the school level, and a clear direction based on adopted standards and curricula for the district. Principals’ knowledge of and involvement with curriculum development and instruction was also named as an influence on student achievement, and specifically as being an important influence in terms of understanding differentiation and access of curriculum to all students including those who are
marginalized (Beard, 2013; Augilar-Nuno, 2012; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Established goals, high expectations, adopted curricula and other factors must be consistently monitored. As Marzano and Waters (2009) stated: “If not monitored continually, district goals can become little more than pithy refrains that are spoken at district and school events and highlighted in written reports” (p. 7). In order to measure progress toward any goal, data must be analyzed regularly and communicated. (Danna & Spatt, 2013; Hitt & Tucker, 2015; Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

**Educational leaders and special education.** School leaders are tasked with improving student achievement for all students but also for each student, including those with disabilities (Boscardin, 2007). When researching how this responsibility is accomplished specifically with regard to special education programs and students a review of research related to general education administrators and special education revealed few results. Much of the research on this topic was published in the past 15 years with the majority in the past 5-10. This timeframe corresponds to recent major education reforms and evolving roles and responsibilities of general education leaders.

Leadership factors influencing achievement of students with disabilities is similar to those identified for all students; however, the impact of influence relies on leaders’ knowledge of instructional and curricular needs of this group of students. Some elements the literature identified as associated with student achievement and success of programs and outcomes include: having the support of at least one or more key administrators (Benz, Lindstrom, Unruh, & Waintrup, 2004); leaders holding high expectations for students with disabilities (Morningstar, Bassett, Kochhar-Bryant, Cashman, & Wehmeyer, 2012) leaders being aware of and requiring the use of evidence based and research based practices which should guide policy and program decisions (Boscardin, 2007; Fowler & Test, 2014; Test, Bartholomew, & Behune, 2015); and
providing opportunities for professional growth (Fowler & Test, 2014). In a literature review of eight relevant articles Bettini, Crockett, Brownell, and Merrill (2016) identified six themes that impact special education teachers’ instructional quality and therefore the achievement of students with disabilities: school culture; instructionally focused administrative and collegial support; instructional materials; instructional grouping (of students in classes at any given time); time for instruction; and time for planning. Clearly school leaders influence every one of these six areas.

Transition planning is a fundamental component of special education which is designed to be a measured, purposeful pathway to prepare students with knowledge and skills to prepare them for their post-school goals for employment, education, and independent living. Research indicated that the strength of transition programs depends on many factors including the support of administration and attention to research-based practices. One study of transition programs revealed that one of the most important factors associated with longevity and success is the support of at least one key administrator. Other associated factors included high staff expectations, and the program being designed to meet the needs of the students it serves (Benz, Lindstrom, Unruh, & Waintrup 2004).

Educational leaders who supervise programs that include students who are blind or visually impaired have a responsibility for their success along with every other student. “Issues around administration of educational programs serving students with visual impairment focus on credentialed personnel, supervision, workload, and access” (Bruce, Ferrell, & Luckner, 2016, p. 52). School leaders must be aware of and provide teachers and professionals who are certified to teacher students who are blind and visually impaired, and then they must support them in their recommendations and efforts to impact student growth. “For ECC instruction to be most effective, these teachers need to have administrative backing, the entire educational team needs
to reinforce the skills being taught, and the family needs to support the instruction that is provided” (Sapp & Hatlen 2010, p. 344).

**Theoretical Framework: Social Capital and Social Network Theory**

Social capital and social network theory are the basis of the theoretical framework for this study due to the influence they have on employment opportunities and results, and due to the fact they are impacted by multiple areas included in the ECC. The interactions between social capital, social networks, and components of ECC are highlighted to explain the reasoning for selecting this theoretical framework.

**Social capital and social networks.** Social capital theory has been evolving since the early 1970’s and is based on the concept that people can experience gain from their social connections. The description has evolved over the years with variations among disciplines that have utilized it. As Farr (2004) noted,

> Social capital is complexly conceptualized as the network of associations, activities, or relations that bind people together as a community via certain norms and psychological capacities, notably trust, which are essential for civil society and productive of future collective action or goods, in the manner of other forms of capital. (p. 9)

Portes (1998) stated that “the consensus is growing in the literature that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (p. 6).

Some early theorists of social capital were Loury, Bourdieu, and Coleman. Loury, who was an economist in the late 1970s found that financial gain is often based on human capital and social capital. He recognized that people living in poverty are perpetually at a disadvantage due to a continuous deficit of economic and social capital. He augured that prohibiting discrimination in hiring alone will not efficiently reduce racial inequalities for two reasons. First, inherited poverty results in less capital for educational materials and investment, and second it results in
poorer social connections to the labor market. Loury found the difference in access to opportunities was based on social connections typically manifested among youth from minority and non-minority groups (Farr, 2004; Portes, 1998). Bourdieu was a French sociologist who theorized that relationships exist in which individuals access the resources of others, and the quantity and quality of those resources is relevant. Bourdieu identified a consistent connection between social class and access to higher education. He associated this pattern with social reproduction or perpetual inequality and identified the difference in access to opportunities was based on the social connections (networks) of youth from minority and non-minority groups. Coleman (1988) investigated the relationship of social capital within the family to educational attainment. He discovered factors which enhanced access to higher education included: group enforcement of norms, privileged access to information and resources, and membership in specific social organizations. Coleman suggested when there are strong ties within a group which he referred to as closure; there is little opportunity for people outside the group to benefit from association. Research has indicated that frequently people with disabilities possess less social capital and therefore benefit less from it (Brucker, 2015; Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2004).

A similar theory built on social theory is the social network theory (Lin, 1999). Lin parallels social capital to social networking because social capital can be considered assets “captured from embedded resources in social networks” (Lin, p. 28). She described the main premise of social capital as “investment in social relations with expected returns” in the forms of information flow, influence on decision makers, and endorsement of social credentials (Lin, p. 31). Lin suggested all forms of social capital (human, cultural, and social capital) function within networks, and actually require a network in order to exist and to be available for one to access. Even in 1999 prior to the internet being as commonplace as it is today Lin projected that
“cybernetworks, defined as networks in cyberspace” (p. 47) would develop into social groups and organizations with networking locations. She stated that cybernetworks are essentially relationships embedded with resources and therefore would “emerge as a major source of social capital” (p. 48).

**Social networks and employment.** Social networking can lead to employment by providing opportunities for people to learn about job vacancies as well as be recommended to potential employees through connections in their social networks. The size and strength of one’s social network increases the chances of finding employment through a network link (Heath & Reed, 2013; Potts, 2005). Social networks include close ties such as family and friends, and weak ties such as acquaintances from work and community interactions. Unfortunately, research indicates people with disabilities including those who are visually impaired have smaller social networks than the general population (Kulkarni, 2012; Potts, 2005; Roy, Dimigen, & Taylor, 1998). Because of the relationship between social networks and educational and employment opportunities, and in light of empirical evidence that people with disabilities indicate they got their job on their own or with the help or referral of friends or contacts, the results of this study will be considered from a social framework theory.

The size and strength of one’s social network increases the chances of finding employment through a network link (Heath & Reed, 2013; Potts, 2005). The skills included in the ECC are directly situated alongside social capital and social networking theories. To review, the nine skill areas of the ECC are: compensatory or functional academic skills such as Braille; orientation and mobility; social interaction skills; independent living skills; recreation and leisure skills; career education; use of assistive technology; sensory efficiency skills; and self-determination. Competency in each area affects a person’s interactions and relationships within
their community and impacts the breadth of their social network. Social capital, social networks, and the ECC are closely intertwined.

**Summary of Literature Review**

Employment rates for people who are blind or visually impaired are inordinately less than the employment rate of the general population. Longstanding employment rates around 37% and empirical evidence related to deficits in employment skills and job seeking skills suggest the majority of students who are blind or visually impaired are not college and career ready when they graduate from high school. Research has identified skills and characteristics associated with positive outcomes for college and career success for this group. Among these a strong foundation in academic areas of reading and math are critical, as well as competency in several areas of the ECC. Career awareness and exploration and skills related to searching for a job were also identified as important skills.

Educational leaders influence student learning. First and foremost, leaders must lead with a vision, working with stakeholders to set and monitor goals that include every student. They must communicate high expectations for all students and lead faculty, students, families, and communities to expect that all students need rigorous and engaging educational experiences. Leaders must ensure all students receive the instruction they need from qualified professionals and that personnel have manageable caseloads and the time and instructional materials required to meet students’ educational needs. It is imperative that school leaders be knowledgeable of curricula and ensure programs and instruction are research-based.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Review of Purpose

Employment outcomes for students who are blind or visually impaired have remained drastically low for decades despite various education reforms. Students who are blind require instruction in core academic content and also require instruction in additional skill areas specific to blindness. They need to be provided appropriate educational programs with necessary individualized adaptations and accommodations delivered by qualified vision professionals. Educational leaders’ knowledge, support, and expectations have an impact on multiple factors associated with program success and student outcomes. Having an understanding of existing programs, and how academics, ECC, and specifically employability skills are integrated are important in order for administrators who supervise programs that include students who are blind.

This study explored the programs in place at a specialized school for the blind to better understand the structure, challenges, and successes, and the experiences and perceptions of educational leaders. It focused on how, when, and where students receive instruction that prepare them for employment. This chapter includes a synopsis of research questions; research design and methodology; data collection and analysis; validity, quality, and ethics; limitations and delimitations; and reflexivity.

Research Questions

This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What systems do specialized schools for the blind have in place to prepare students for post-school employment?
2. What are the experiences and observations of educational leaders and individuals who worked with students through an educational, rehabilitation, or employment perspective?

3. What are the job search and employment experiences of graduates who are blind/visually impaired and where do they perceive they learned these skills?

4. What are the implications and challenges for educational leaders when evaluating programs, developing curriculum, and influencing programs or individualized education?

Table 3

_Data Collection Matrix_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Data collection sources</th>
<th>How did I access the data?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) What systems do specialized schools for the blind have in place to prepare students for post-school employment?</td>
<td>Document review Site observations In-Depth interviews</td>
<td>In-depth interviews with educational leaders, staff, students, graduates, and employers; site observations; document review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) What are the experiences and observations of educational leaders and individuals who worked with students through an educational, rehabilitation, or employment perspective?</td>
<td>Document review Site observations In-Depth interviews</td>
<td>In-depth interviews with educational leaders, staff, students, graduates, and employers; site observations; document review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) What are the job search and employment experiences of graduates who are blind/visually impaired and where do they perceive they learned these skills?</td>
<td>Document review Site observations In-Depth interviews</td>
<td>In-depth interviews with educational leaders, staff, students, graduates, and employers; site observations; document review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) What are the implications and challenges for educational leaders when evaluating programs, developing curriculum, and influencing programs or individualized education?</td>
<td>Document review Site observations In-Depth interviews</td>
<td>In-depth interviews with educational leaders, staff, students, graduates, and employers; site observations; document review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative research. Qualitative research design has evolved and developed over time and includes several approaches to research with differences according to various disciplines. Within various approaches there are common elements including human or social interaction, research being conducted in naturally occurring settings, collection of data, and the role of the researcher in analyzing and interpreting data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Creswell (2007) provided this definition of qualitative research:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflectivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem. (p. 37)

This study utilized a qualitative embedded study research design in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders within the setting of an educational program, and specifically focused on program components aimed to improve employment outcomes for people who are blind or visually impaired. Several research strategies are included under the umbrella of qualitative research. Ethnography, phenomenology, case study, and grounded theory are a few qualitative research options (Creswell, 2009; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Case study was the strategy used for this study.

Embedded case study. Case study is an in-depth exploration of a person, group, situation, event, or process. Yin (2009) stated that case study design is one of the most challenging, however it is the preferred method “when (a) “how” or “why” questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events, and (c) the focus is on a contemporary
phenomenon within a real-life context” (p. 2). Hancock and Algozzine (2006) described case studies as “intensive analyses and descriptions of a single unit or system bounded by space and time” (p. 11). Embedded case studies include more than one unit of analysis within the selected case which all focus on various prominent aspects of the case as a whole. Investigating phenomenon at deeper, subunit levels can help a case stay focused and can enrich insights into the overall single case (Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2009).

Yin (2009) stressed the importance of developing a research design to plan and guide the case study from the outset and stated that design may vary according to the specific study however generally it has five components: 1) research questions, 2) propositions (if any), 3) unit of analysis, 4) logic linking the data to the propositions or questions.; and 5) criteria for interpreting the findings. Another essential component to research design is development of a theoretical framework. This framework provides guidance in research design decisions and data collection, and also provides the basis for analytic generalization of the case study (Yin, 2009). Social capital and social networks were the basis of the theoretical framework for this study. The research design guides the study from the beginning planning stages; from data collection, analysis, and final write up, the research design establishes a clear link between the research questions and the study findings.

**Case Boundaries, Selection, and Participants**

In a case study the case is commonly selected through purposeful sampling in order to best address the purpose and questions of the research. Authorities indicate that it can be difficult to determine what a case is for any given study, yet in order to keep the research focused it is important to identify boundaries for the unit of analysis (Creswell, 2014; Yin 2009). Miles & Huberman (1994) described a case as being the heart of a study or the specific focus. Although
there may be innumerable topics or facts related to the case the researcher must determine boundaries in order to guide relevant data collection focused on the research questions (Miles and Huberman; Yin, 2009).

The case and participants for this study were selected using purposeful sampling. Several requirements were established for potential cases for this study. In order to be appropriately aligned to the purpose of the study and provide data related to the research questions it was imperative for the case to be a school which specialized in educating blind and visually impaired students and projected a high level of commitment to preparing students for successful transition out of school and into careers. The school had to have established instructional programs in core academic areas, ECC, and some type of programing focused specifically on employment skills. Potential schools also had to have publicly available school data on their website (information about programs, curricula, and student transition or employment) and preferably have historical data on outcomes for graduates.

Eight specialized schools for the blind that met the criteria were considered. These schools were identified through a investigation of their websites looking for evidence of the criteria established for the case. School superintendents were contacted initially through email and phone calls explaining the purpose of the study and determining if a school met the boundaries to be a case. The superintendent of the site school was enthusiastic about his school being the case for the study. He emphatically described instructional programs and described SETE as a model program focusing on employability and job experience. Once the case was identified the superintendent formally granted permission for the study to be conducted. He then informed school leaders and faculty of the research project and provided to this researcher the names and contact information of two principals plus one teacher-leader to serve as the main
contact or liaison throughout the course of the study. Initial contacts to these key participants (school leaders and program leaders) were through email or phone call. Other potential participants were identified and contacted at the initial site visit which allowed the researcher to become better oriented with program structure and staff roles. On the day of registration for the summer SETE program students were invited to participate. The study was explained to students and parents and questions about the study were answered. Additionally, staff identified alumni who might participate then they contacted the alumni for permission to provide this researcher the graduate’s name and phone number. Employers were identified and contacted by SETE program leaders to inquire of their interest to participate, then they arranged interview times and locations. Signed consent forms were obtained from all participants 18 and older. Parental consent forms as well as student assent forms were signed for those current students under 18 years old. The purpose of the study was explained to each participant as was the semi-structured interview process and a request to follow up to check for accuracy. Everyone who was invited to join the study was reassured there would be no repercussions for declining to participate and that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions.

Interview participants were categorized into the following groups: school leaders, staff, employers, graduates, and current (SETE) students. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to be used in the study. There were a total of 26 interview participants in the study: 3 educational leaders, 5 staff, 2 employers, 4 graduates, and 12 current students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant group</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Leaders (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent, Mr. Mustard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal, Ms. Tish</td>
<td></td>
<td>Elementary principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal, Mr. Felipe</td>
<td></td>
<td>High School principal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Participants
Table 4 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff (5)</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Georgetta</td>
<td>Teacher, Student Work Experience program during the school year and summer SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>SETE Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yoli</td>
<td>SETE Co-Leader Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spidee</td>
<td>Rehabilitation Employment Specialist, Former employee of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leanne</td>
<td>Rehabilitation Employment Specialist, Former employee of the school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant group</th>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employers (2)</td>
<td>James</td>
<td>Business owner, hosted and hired SETE students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>Business COO, hosted and hired students from the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates (4)</td>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Employee at computer repair business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>Also a school employee: Program Coordinator, and SETE Co-Leader Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sawyer</td>
<td>Employee for citizen advocacy agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Physical Therapist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SETE Students (12)</td>
<td>Ainsley</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ciara</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dexter</td>
<td>Currently attends local home school, previously attended site school, attends SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ernie</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kaitlyn</td>
<td>Currently attends local home school, attends case school short course and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Megatron</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nemo</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Polly</td>
<td>Attends case school and SETE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>Currently attends local home school and case school SETE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data Collection**

The research design included gathering data through a variety of methods, with the central method being in-depth interviews. Other data were collected through site visits, observations, and review of documents. There are few guidelines for the type or amount of data that should be collected in case studies. Authorities indicate there should be a variety of sources resulting in a great amount of rich and detailed information. One way to determine when to stop collecting data is when there is enough evidence to address the research questions, purpose, and any propositions or themes. Another way to determine when to stop is when additional data will not provide new ideas or insights (Cassell & Symon, 2004; Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2009). The data for this study were mainly collected during the summer of 2017 over a five week period during which time the four week summer SETE program occurred. This window of time provided a naturally occurring entry into and exit from the field. Over the course of the data collection period the researcher spent nine days onsite conducting interviews and observations plus additional time on phone interviews for a total of approximately 80 hours.

**Interviews.** According to Yin (2009) interviews are one of the most commonly used and one of the most important sources of data for case studies. There are strengths associated with interviews including the ability to focus on the topics of the case and the revelation of richly described real-life experiences and perceptions. There are also potential weaknesses such as the risk of bias in questioning, responses, recall, or interpretation of responses. These concerns are addressed later in the sections on validity and reflexivity. The interview protocols were designed with the research questions and theoretical framework in mind. Separate, but in some cases similar, protocols were designed for the various groups of interviewees. They were constructed
with demographic inquiries to start off then transitioned into less structured open-ended questions (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2009).

For this study the majority of the semi-structured interviews (24) were conducted in a single face-to-face meeting at the school or a business. Two were conducted by phone due to the distance and availability of the participants. All of the interview participants were current and former students, staff, and employers of the school or SETE program. During the introductory portion of each interview the individual was informed of the option to skip any question they did not want to answer or to discontinue the interview at any time. The interview sessions ranged in length of time from 20 to 90 minutes. Three of the interviews were conducted with school leaders including the superintendent and two principals. Four staff participants engaged in more than one interview sitting to provide additional data. Every effort was made to conduct student interviews outside of instructional program activities. This was accomplished at various times, including in the morning between student arrival and program start, afternoons when some students returned from work and were waiting for the rest of the students in order to begin the next activity, and in the dorms on weekend or weeknight evenings. With permission from each participant the interview was audio recorded and notes were taken as a backup reference. Interview recordings were transcribed using a two-step method: initially the recording was transcribed by voice recognition transcription software, and then the researcher listened to every interview audio file while reading the electronically produced transcription to check for accuracy against handwritten notes taken during the interview. Once the interviews were transcribed the documents were emailed to the participants and each one of them was asked to review for accuracy and provide feedback. This practice of member checking helps to ensure
accuracy. One participant stated he did not want to review the transcript by email, mail, or verbally on the phone.

**Site observations.** Observations were conducted in classroom and job sites in order to collect data on programmatic and curricular activities in natural settings. Observation locations included classrooms and the cafeteria at the school, various student work locations, and community service programs. Descriptive notes were taken of the sites, and in some instances further information was gathered from websites of the worksite or community program. Observations in the natural setting align with qualitative design and provide an additional source of data (Creswell, 2007; Yin). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described it this way: “as a technique for gathering information, the observational method relies on a researcher’s seeing and hearing things and recording these observations, rather than relying on subjects’ self-report responses to question or statements” (p. 208).

As researcher, I acted as a non-participant observer. I was known to the superintendent and one principal of the school and both were interviewed. They were both on-site during SETE and the principal was present at SETE at the start of the day to meet with staff but not present in the classroom activities or jobsites where observations occurred. Throughout the 5-week period I was introduced to, interviewed, and engaged in conversations with the other staff, students, graduates, and employers I encountered but I did not know them prior to the study. I did not have an active role or responsibility in the program delivery or decision making. I was present as an observer to collect information about the program.

**Document reviews.** “Because of their overall value, documents play an explicit role in any data collection in doing case studies” (Yin, 2009 p. 103). Documents reviewed as evidence for this case study included items such as policies, program descriptions, and various forms,
worksheets, lesson plans and assignments. The evidence gleaned from these was utilized as one more source of data to strengthen the study. It was used to further inform evidence collected through interviews and site observations.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed through a process of inductive and deductive reasoning. In this manner individual chunks of data are grouped together in categories according to patterns and the categories are connected into themes. Once themes are established then details are considered again in terms of the relevance to the overall theme (Creswell, 2014). The following stages of data analysis for qualitative research suggested by Creswell (2014) were observed in this study:

- Raw data
- Organizing and Preparing Data for Analysis
- Reading Through All Data
- Coding the Data
  - Themes
  - Description
- Interpreting Themes/Description
- Interpreting the Meaning of Themes/Descriptions

Similarly McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described coding as a process of analyzing data and identifying meaningful segments that are categorized into groups which are then named or coded. Codes are compared and grouped into major themes or categories and subthemes which are reviewed to identify patterns within and across categories. Coding manually can be quite time consuming and themes may be overlooked therefore, coding software was utilized (Creswell, 2014). Interview transcripts were uploaded to and coded in the cloud-based program Dedoose. At the initial coding phase protocols were sorted into groups by the following categories: educational leaders, staff, current students, former students, and employers to identify similarities or differences in responses. Interviews were coded using a line-by-line method. Data were reviewed continuously during the data collection phase in an effort to be immersed and
familiar as well as to watch for emerging themes. Anticipated themes were ECC, social capitol, and social networking. Emerging themes were also expected and were identified and investigated throughout the study.

**Validity**

Researchers are ethically responsible for the ensuring the quality and rigor of any type of research with regard to gathering evidence, and using systematic procedures (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Validity in qualitative research is established by checking the accuracy of data (Creswell, 2014) and McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained that the term validity in qualitative research refers to the degree to which “the researcher and participants agree on the description or compositions of events and especially on the meanings of these events” (p. 330). In order to establish validity the following strategies were utilized: triangulation of data; member checking; thick, rich description; prolonged time in the field; and reflexivity (Creswell 2014). Triangulation of data was accomplished through the use of multiple data sources including interviews, observations, and document reviews. Member checking involved the researcher verbally restating responses to participants during interviews and also emailing a copy of the transcribed interview to each participant in order for them to confirm it accurately reflected what they intended to convey. Thick, rich descriptions were used to describe the case and observations, and the researcher made multiple visits to the case school and other program locations such as worksites.

**Reliability**

Qualitative reliability means that if the same procedures were followed for the same case study then the results would be the same repeatedly (Yin, 2009). One way to safeguard the reliability of a study is to document procedures and to use a case study protocol which was done
for this study (Yin, 2009). Another strategy is proofreading transcripts to check for obvious errors including carefully comparing digitally transcribed transcripts to handwritten notes taken during interviews. In addition, during the data analysis phase I continuously reviewed codes and the excerpts they contained to verify consistency of meanings (Gibbs, 2007). This process was streamlined through the data analysis options available in the software program (Dedoose) I used.

Ethics

When human subjects are involved in research it is imperative to ensure safeguards are taken to protect their safety, well-being, and the security of confidential information they share. Furthermore, it is important to relate their responses accurately in the study findings (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2008; Creswell, 2014). The researcher must have their research proposal reviewed by a committee that provides protections against violations of human rights, assesses risk to participants, and considers risks to vulnerable populations being considered for the study. A research protocol application for this study was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Potential participants were informed they could be no repercussions if they chose not to participate or if they did consent then withdrew later. Consent forms were provided and signed prior to participant interviews. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and no identifiable information was shared. Sensitive data such as interview transcriptions and the key to participant names and pseudonyms were stored in encrypted files on a computer with a password protected log in. The researcher went to great lengths to respect the dignity of participants, security of identities and raw data.
Theoretical Framework

Theory development is an essential component of case study design and according to Yin (2009), “articulating "theory" about what is being studied and what is to be learned helps to operationalize case study designs and make them more explicit” (Yin, 2009, p. 24). This study utilized a theoretical framework which included social capital and social network. Social capital lies in and is accessed through social networks (Lin, 1999) and many people learn about employment opportunities (Heath & Reed, 2013; Potts, 2005).

Statement of Reflexivity

A characteristic of qualitative research is the researcher herself being the instrument of data collection through her role in observations, interviews, taking field notes, then interpreting all of the data. A researcher’s background can affect his or her interpretation of interactions with participants or data or with other aspects of the research process (Creswell, 2014). Reflexivity is described as rigorous self-scrutiny by posing difficult questions throughout the entire research process about how the researcher’s personal experiences play a role in data collection, analysis, and construction of findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this study I reflected on my personal background and experiences in order to remain aware of how they may influence interactions and interpretations. I took detailed notes taking during site visits, interviews, observations, data review and analysis and throughout the writing process which I reviewed regularly. Notetaking allowed for writing down assumptions, self-reflection, and preconceptions that surface. It also allowed for recording related detailed notes about interviews. Notes were used as a reference both as the study progressed and themes emerged, as well as a tool to compare or audit data and findings.
In my current role as a school leader I feel responsible and driven to be knowledgeable of current best practice and research based evidence. I have worked with students who are blind or visually impaired for over 20 years. There is continual concern in the field about the persistent low employment outcomes for students who are blind or visually impaired, and there is also concern among professionals in the field about the scarcity of published research. The concern for quality of life of group of individuals spurs my interest to better understand their experiences surrounding all aspects of employment. I am particularly driven to understand if K-12 education is sufficiently preparing students with skills for employment and for efficiently and competitively seeking for employment. During my career I have been an active member of various vision professional organizations, education task forces, advisory councils, and local and statewide transition committees. One of the organizations I belong to is a nationwide group of leaders in the field of visual impairment. The Council of Schools and Services for the Blind or COSB is composed of leaders of specialized schools and agencies for the blind with the common goal of improving services to children who are blind and visually impaired. Through this organization I identified potential cases for this research. I knew the superintendent and one principal of the school utilized in this case study because they also serve on COSB.

In the past 20 years our country has experienced legislated educational initiatives aimed at ensuring all learners experience measurable achievement. We have witnessed various global innovations such as the internet, distance learning through technology, and working from remote locations, all of which have opened up educational, social, and employment opportunities for people worldwide. The development of various assistive technologies has provided access to materials, information, and interactions previously not easily accessible for individuals who are blind and visually impaired. Still employment rates have remained stably low. Being painfully
aware of the continuously low employment rates for adults who are blind or visually impaired spurred this school leader to question if graduates truly are career ready. Over the course of this study I reflected on separating my personal background knowledge and experiences from what I was actually seeing and hearing in interviews and site observations. I continued this reflective practice throughout data analysis and the remainder of the study.
Chapter 4

The Case

This chapter presents the case, a specialized school for blind and visually impaired students. It begins with an overall physical description of the school campus followed by a detailed description of participants in order to offer a rich frame of reference of interview responses and context of the case. Next, programs and curriculum components in place to prepare students for employment are described, along with the experiences of participants working or attending the programs. Expected and emergent themes are discussed throughout. Some expected themes were core curriculum, ECC, and the influence of the work of educational leaders. Emerging themes included student self-determination and advocacy; the importance and impact of outreach programs offered by the school, and the value of collaborative partnerships with other service agencies. One of the strongest emerging themes related to core curriculum was the rigid graduation course requirements set by the state and how those interplay with additional disability-specific educational needs of the students. Another robust theme was having and adhering to long term schoolwide goals.

This specialized school for students PreK-12th grade who are visually impaired is located on the edge of an urban area on a 63-acre campus that includes 31 buildings. It has been in operation over 100 years. The school website states that the school educates and invests in children who are blind or have low vision either with or without additional disabilities, that other schools either cannot or else have difficulty serving. Approximately 170 students receive services onsite in a traditional 9-month school program for preschool through high school. Students live as close as a few blocks to as far away as a few hours. Some are residential students, meaning they live on campus in the dormitory during the week while school is in
session then go home on weekends, holiday breaks, and summer months. Other students are “day students” who live close enough to reside at home and commute daily to school. To be eligible for services students must have a visual impairment that negatively impacts educational progress and be a citizen of the state. In accordance with IDEA, educational placement must be determined by the student’s case conference committee. In addition to the students served in the traditional 9-month school-year program, many more are served through a variety of outreach programs at the school or in communities throughout the state. Funding comes primarily from appropriations in the state budget, with around 3% from grants and donations. Occasionally the school receives funding from various generous donors. The school is governed by a 10-member governor-appointed school board that meets bimonthly.

When arriving at the main entrance to the campus one must drive past a stately brick entryway with decorative yet functioning iron gates that are secured at night. The first building after the entrance is the main building, an enormous brick building with an impressive bell tower that looms well above the building itself. From here roads wind though campus past small homes built for the purpose of teaching independent living skills to students, then past the aquatic center and dormitories, and around to buildings housing the physical plant and vehicles. Covered walkways connect the main building with several others. Most classes are taught in the main building and the student to teacher ratio is around 5:1. Various departments include education, residential, health services, dietary, housekeeping, technology, maintenance, and the business and administrative offices. There are some related but distinct programs located on the school’s campus, including the state’s Educational Resource Center, which is a statewide repository of accessible materials and equipment available to blind and visually impaired student throughout the state. A non-profit foundation for blind children is also located on the campus.
The school strives to promote excellence in learning for blind and low vision students who may or may not have additional disabilities. A commitment to teaching both core curriculum and ECC is clearly articulated on the website, in the Parent/Student Handbook and was evident in interviews and observations. The high school program offers a full range of core academics including all of the core requirements of the state for graduation as well as modified functional academics. In addition there are a full array of related services, instruction in ECC areas, numerous extracurricular offerings, a variety of recreational activities, and student employment experience opportunities. Because the focus of this study was on how the school prepares students for employment and the experiences of school leaders, those educational components related to employment preparation were given the greatest attention.

Continuous school improvement is driven by a strategic plan. This plan provides an organized structure to promote improvement in identified agreed upon priorities. The superintendent and leadership team coordinate the process of gathering and reviewing data then designing the plan which is developed with input from educational leaders, staff, students, parents, alumni, and other stakeholders. It is written as a ten year strategic plan but progress is reported annually by the superintendent and the plan is updated every three years. According to the superintendent, the plan is utilized by the school leadership team as a guide for decision making in short and long term planning. The Plan identifies existing key strengths and existing as well as anticipated critical issues (such as staff turnover due to projected retirements). The overarching goal of the strategic plan is to increase the number of students served throughout the state regardless of where they attend school, both in programs based at the school and through outreach. It is divided into three challenges:

1. Aligning the unique assets of the School so that more children throughout the state can be connected to them;
2. Enhance the center-based (on-campus) educational program; and

3. Ensuring the comprehensive delivery of resources, supports, interventions, and services available to and necessary for children who are blind and visually impaired without duplicating services and by serving as a broker to connect these children with the diverse assets of educational institutions throughout the state (From the school strategic plan, p. 2).

These three challenges are addressed within five action plans. Each of the five plans begins with a clearly defined challenge statement and a strategic response which is followed by detailed measurable objectives. The five actions are: 1: Redirect and enhance the center-based program; 2: Expand the outreach programs; 3: Establish a state-of-the-art developmental assessment and training center; 4: Establish multi-dimensional data collection paradigms and methods; 5: Substantially enhance the capacity of the foundation (From the school strategic plan).

Participants

Twenty-six people participated in the study. Participants were organized into the following categories: School leaders, staff, employers, graduates, and current students. The sections below provide details on individuals and groups of participants.

School leaders. Educational leaders who participated in this study included the superintendent and two principals. In addition to being certified as administrators and in a variety of instructional content areas, all three were certified to teach students with low vision or blindness. At the time of the interview Mr. Mustard, the superintendent of the school possessed bachelors and Master’s degrees and had 35 years of experience as an educational leader, with 25 of those years at this school. It was immediately apparent that Mr. Mustard was passionate about his own school as well as the broader, entire group of all students everywhere who are blind and visually impaired. It was also obvious he was knowledgeable about employment statistics for blind and visually impaired adults and had spent time and resources actively seeking solutions as well as planning and implementing programs at the school aimed to improve these outcomes. When I
initially contacted Superintendent Mustard to discuss the purpose of this study he immediately agreed, enthusiastically describing the student work program and summer SETE, naming specific businesses involved and their roles, telling some of the history, and naming key staff who should be involved in the study. He expressed that he believes it is important for staff to be empowered, to share ideas even if they challenge him, to be involved in discussions and decision making processes as much as possible. Organized and informal meetings provide spaces for these discussions.

Superintendent Mustard’s vision about employment outcomes for students who are blind or visually impaired was that they “should have the same opportunities for employment as their sighted counterparts.” Barriers to employment he had witnessed included individuals who are blind and quite capable of working not being able to get their “foot in the door” due to “misperceptions and lack of knowledge on the part of employers” who truly do not know whether the candidate can do the job. He perceived there is also a great concern on the part of employers regarding what type of and the cost of accommodations an individual may need. He firmly believed that programs at his school have definitely had a positive impact on employment outcomes for students who attended.

Of the two principals, Ms. Tish served as the elementary principal and Director of Outreach. She had worked at the school six years and had prior experience both in leadership positions and as an itinerant blind low vision teacher for a total of 17 years of experience in the education profession. Ms. Tish possessed undergraduate and three Masters’ degrees. She described herself as having a lifelong history with the field of blind low vision as well as the school. She had a sibling who attended the school and both of her parents had worked there. Ms. Tish was certainly knowledgeable about employment rates and circumstances of blind and
visually impaired adults as evidenced by her reference to the “70 to 80% unemployment rate”
and her explanation of the types of instructional activities at the school that are designed to make
a positive impact. Her perception was the low employment rate is related to a few factors: lack of
confidence and belief in one’s ability to work (job-seekers), and employers not being willing to
hire people who are blind due to fear of the unknown, being unsure if a blind person can do the
job, or concern of risks or liability.

The high school principal, Mr. Felipe, had over 19 years of experience working with
students who are blind or visually impaired and possessed a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees.
Leadership roles he had in included being a principal at this school for nine years and being
president of a national organization of principals of schools for the blind. Mr. Felipe’s responses
to interview questions clearly demonstrated his accurate understanding of the current and
historical employment rate of adults with visual impairments. For him this knowledge was a
driving force in program planning and decisions. He perceived the administrative team of the
school worked closely together, continuously evaluated programs based on student data and test
scores as well as other factors, and the team had an effective influence on programming. Mr.
Felipe’s vision for employment outcomes was that students “have the proper education, the
proper training . . . the proper experiences, to be able to get an interview and get a job.” He
perceived that students were definitely gaining meaningful experiences through programs
provided by the school.

**Staff.** Five staff who worked in a variety of roles participated in interviews. Three
(Georgetta, Sarah, and Yoli) currently work for the school during the school year and for
specialized school outreach programs such as SETE. The other two staff interviewed worked for
a rehabilitation agency specializing in services for blind adults. However these two (Spidee and
Leanne previously worked for the school. Between just these five staff there was 75 years of experience working at the school. This impressive number of years demonstrates a level of commitment and satisfaction which was verbalized by the staff. Georgetta had taught at the school nearly 30 years and had various responsibilities and teacher leadership roles, including starting “the three-year old program” and leading the school accreditation process. The last eight years she taught employment related skills to high school students and coordinated the student work program during the school year. Sarah had taught at the school over 20 years and held various teacher leadership roles. For instance, she was the lead for accreditation three times, had worked with grants, and sponsored organizations such as student council and forensics. She was in charge of several student trips to NASA in which they toured the facilities and met blind people who worked there. Sarah was also the director of the summer SETE program this year. Yoli had five years of teaching experience – all of them at this school. Her leadership roles included being a coach, sponsor of student council and the senior class, and she was one of the two lead teachers for SETE this year. Of the two additional SETE staff who participated, Spidee was previously a job coach and classroom aide at this school, and Leanne worked there 12 years as a teacher. Both remained actively involved with the school in their current employment with a major service provider for adults and transition age students who are visually impaired. Specifically, they both work with transition age students from the school during SETE and after they have graduated.

**Employers.** Of the two employers who participated, Grant was the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of a rehabilitation agency which had an active and ongoing collaborative relationship with the school for many years both during the regular school year and for other programs such as SETE. This agency provides specialized comprehensive rehabilitation
services, job training, and employment programs for blind and visually impaired persons in the state. One of the many unique things about this agency is it serves only blind and low vision clients. Grant had worked at this company 12 years and was involved in the hiring process at least five of those years. Prior to working at this company he had no interaction with applicants or employees who were blind or visually impaired. His responses during the interview revealed that he was familiar with employment rates for blind adults. He was also knowledgeable and spoke passionately about the opportunities and programs available through this agency.

Historically and at the time of this study several former students of the school worked for this employer in a variety of positions such as switchboard/front desk, on production lines, in food service, or in office settings.

A second employer, James, was a long-time local business owner who owned and managed a computer repair and service store for 10 years. He handled every aspect of hiring his employees. James had participated as an employer in SETE several summers and had hosted at least five student workers through the program. He subsequently hired a graduate who had worked for him through SETE. That graduate, Kevin (also a participant in this study), had been employed at the shop seven years at the time of the interview. According to James, Kevin was the longest-term employee he ever had at any of his businesses. At James’ encouragement Kevin was actively seeking employment at other places either as a second job or a primary job, in an effort to broaden his work experience and perhaps get a job with increasing responsibilities and opportunities to advance.

**Graduates.** Four graduates were included in this study. Kevin, who was introduced in the employer section above, attended the school five years, which included his high school years. As explained above, he currently worked full-time at a business that specializes in computers and
computer repair, where he had worked the past seven years. Wanda was a graduate of this school who was now employed there full-time instructing students in ECC areas. She was one of the two lead teachers for the summer SETE program this year. While a student there Wanda attended the school 13 years, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and also attended SETE. A third graduate participant, Sawyer, had attended the school six years. At the time of the study he was employed part-time at a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating for residents of the state. Henry, one of the four graduates did not attend the regular 9-month school-year program but he attended summer school a few years where he recalled studying math and English and more importantly being awakened to the existence and use of various assistive technology devices along with specialized skills relative to his visual impairment. Henry also attended summer SETE when he was in high school. He was currently working full time as a physical therapist for a multi-site medical provider.

**Current students.** Data for this study were collected during the summer SETE program; therefore all of the students who participated in the study participated in that program. Of the 12 students interviewed, nine attended school here during the school year and the remaining three attended different local public schools, each near their own home. Current student participants were represented equally by gender and they ranged in age from 16 to 20 years old. Seven of them were attending SETE for the first time, four were in the program for the second year, and one student was participating for the third time.

**Systems in Place to Prepare Students for Post-school Employment**

**Core curriculum.** Core academic content courses were the primary focus of the traditional, on-campus, 9-month school-year program. This theme was echoed repeatedly during interviews and was evident in handbooks. The state where this school is located has legislation
regarding graduation requirements and eligibility criteria for diplomas. These requirements for graduation drive curriculum taught by all schools, which in turn dictate student course schedules for all four years of high school (and earlier than ninth grade in some instances). Four types of academic diplomas could be earned in this state. Three versions of the academic diploma are based on college and career readiness, each of which requires completion of 40-credit hours (specified college prep courses): the standard 40-hour version, an academic honors version, and a technical honors version. The fourth available diploma is a “general” diploma. State policy was that all students were expected to work toward one of the three versions of the 40-hour diploma, however, through an established process parents could work with the school so their child could opt out of a 40-hour diploma into a general diploma. Another document available was a Certificate of Completion or COC which was only available to special education students who completed the educational program outlined in their IEP. Legislation required that when a student entered ninth grade or turned 14 years old the IEP team must determine which path the student will pursue: either a high school diploma or a certificate of completion. The school which was the unit of study for this research offered all of the options for diplomas and completion, based on the determination of each IEP team. An important note is that state legislation also established that the 40-hour diploma is a minimum requirement for admission to all the state’s universities.

The state had additional rules and expectations about graduation. They required that students complete specific core academic coursework to earn one of the 40-hour diplomas, do so in four years (no longer), and graduate with their expected graduation cohort (established when the child entered ninth grade). A student was only recognized as a graduate if they met the requirements for one of the three 40-hour versions of diplomas. Schools could still get credit
toward successful outcome data for students who took five or six years to complete the specific graduation requirements for a 40-hour diploma. To clarify, the state did not consider a student who earned a general diploma or COC to be a graduate. This often impacted blind and visually impaired students who needed additional time in their course scheduled to receive curriculum in disability specific areas of need. A document from the state education department website with frequently asked questions about graduation rates and statistics stated that students who received a COC were “not considered dropouts however, for the purposes of graduation rate calculation, these students are not considered graduates” (State education department document). Schools which exceeded the threshold (5%) of students not graduating with their cohort were required to provide documentation for an audit of graduation rates. This information regarding state laws and monitoring provided a backdrop for the programs and services offered at this school and the pressures and parameters within which educational leaders functioned and made day-to-day and long term decisions and plans.

Perceptions of participants about core academic coursework at the school reflected a similar sense of urgency and expectation as that being communicated by the state. When asked what classes they had completed, every student listed core academic areas including English, social studies, sciences, and math. Those students on a path to a 40-hour diploma named courses such as Biology, Chemistry, Algebra 1 and 2, Geometry, Pre-calculus, AP U.S. History, and foreign languages. A student Ainsley said, “I took the generals you need to graduate. You know algebra, Biology, four years of English and geometry . . . history classes, government, econ, U.S. history, geography, gym, health. I did choir for a couple years.” Another student, David said:

I took my math—Algebra 1, 2, and Geometry then I did pre-calculus my senior year. For English credits I took four English classes . . . I did AP U.S. History for a semester but I hate U.S. history so I dropped the class but I did do U.S. History for a year. I did World History my sophomore year . . . gym – freshman, Health my sophomore year. I did
Business classes my senior year. The rest is just basically a normal schedule. . . . Biology freshman year, chemistry sophomore.

Graduates had similar responses about their academic experiences at the school. Kevin listed the courses he took as Algebra 1 and 2, Government, Earth Space Science, Biology, and English. Wanda recalled her courses this way:

I took four years of Spanish: two of them at the blind school and two at the local public high school, World history, American history, Government, and Econ. In terms of academics it was essentially everything you would need for an honors diploma. And then as far as electives I took band four years and piano.

Some students required instruction different from the core classes required for the 40-hour diploma. Every student at this school had an IEP and each individual team determined the course of study needed for the student. As explained earlier, this state requires student IEP teams to indicate whether a student will pursue a diploma or COC. Superintendent Mustard explained sometimes that was a clear decision for IEP teams, but it was difficult for students who fell in between – meaning those who were enrolled in some courses required for a diploma but needed more support in other courses. As he said, “we have kids that might graduate with credits but not enough credits to graduate with a diploma.” For those students who needed something other than the state prescribed courses this school provided for their needs as well. According to Principal Felipe, there is a section in the high school schedule for students who may have some general curriculum courses and some functional or resource supported courses. In this section students do receive direct instruction on preparing for employment such as resume writing and practice with interviews. There was also a Life Skills curriculum focused on academic and ECC areas of need as identified by IEP teams. This program utilized the Unique Learning System: Special Education Curriculum which includes activities related to careers and employability in the monthly units. Instruction was typically individually paced.
Comments from current students and graduates further illustrated the individualized diversity of academic programming. One student Megatron described his courses this way:

They put me in ungraded class because it goes at your own pace. And in this class I moved up from a lower one which meant now I'm moved up to the highest one they got . . . And in this class I can do other classes too. Last year I got to do earth science for the first time.

Those students enrolled in a path other than the 40-hour diploma (based on their IEP) frequently referred to core academic areas of instruction and described their course of study as “ungraded,” “pass/fail,” or “Life Skills.” They explained that they needed extra help with academics, or that they had difficulty learning in one or more subjects, and their courses were taught at their individual pace. Ernie talked about what he has learned in life skills classes including “how to live on your own, find an apartment, and a job. It's helped me out a lot because it kept me busy. I've learned how to budget. You do a mock ledger, there's math classes, some reading, social skills.” One graduate said he took “History, some science, language arts, and math was very hard so I was ungraded in math.”

Like many schools this one does not have the resources to offer every class or service their students may need; however, over time educational leaders of the school have worked with other education agencies in the area to establish opportunities for students beyond the campus boundaries. Some students take classes such as advanced sciences and foreign languages at a local public high school. Others attended classes in areas such as Child Care, computers, hospitality management, or music and sound at the local career and technical education center. When asked what specific instruction prepared him for employment, Kevin, the graduate who worked in a computer repair shop said, “The computer repair class I took at the Career Center. That definitely helped me get this job. That way I came in with some knowledge of computer
repair.” Kevin indicated it also helped prepare him for a post-secondary training program where he took courses on computer repair and received an industry certification.

**Expanded core curriculum for students who are blind or visually impaired.** An anticipated theme was ECC and the data contained an overwhelming number of references. Over 90 interview phrases had one or more mentions of areas of the ECC, and documents such as program descriptions also included numerous references. All 24 interviews contained references to ECC. Though all nine areas of the ECC were clearly identified in the data, the most frequently and intricately noted subthemes of ECC were social skills, self-advocacy, self-determination, and career skills. Certainly, independent living skills, assistive technology, Braille and orientation and mobility appeared frequently also. The ECC theme persisted throughout the study and the most prominent ideas gleaned from the data are contained in this section.

Instruction in ECC sometimes occurred in stand-alone courses with a specific focus on one skill area, however, instruction in ECC areas was also integrated into all courses and typical daily activities. Separate classes included compensatory academic skills (Braille, low vision devises, etc.), orientation and mobility, and assistive technology; instruction and practice in these areas was also integrated throughout school and dorm life. Units of direct instruction in Career Education were provided for some students but not for all as will be explained later. Instruction in social interaction skills and self-determination were integrated throughout programming, though it was provided more intensely for students when their IEP team identified it as an area of need. Some students received direct instruction in independent living skills while others did not, but these skills were reinforced for all students across all settings. Decisions about content
delivery method and setting were based on factors such as complexity of content, amount of time required for instruction and individual student needs.

ECC themes appeared in graduate and student responses to how their visual impairment affects their daily life, job search, and employment. Graduates’ responses included they cannot drive, job websites and online applications are not always compatible with accessibility software, their visual impairment causes them to read print slowly or they have to re-read things (due to nystagmus), they would not consider jobs which require or rely on vision to perform or be safe (truck driver, construction), they needed information provided either in Braille or electronic format (such as email or word document), and almost all spoke of needing to learn the physical layout of the worksite (ideally in advance of starting the job). Three current students who easily described potential impacts of their disability on employment were among those who had participated in the SETE program two or more years. First, Megatron shared he has limitations on lifting due to risk of retinal detachment. Ernie explained that it may take longer for a blind person to learn a job because they have to be shown each task step by step, each individual piece, product, or equipment they will be working with to complete the job. Dexter said that a person with low vision may have to prove to his boss how much he can actually see if an employer did not believe him. All of these disability related employment impacts must be addressed through intentional instruction in ECC skills.

Areas of ECC were named by graduates as crucial areas of instruction that prepared them for successful employment. Wanda named several ECC skills she uses daily that contribute to her employment achievements including using assistive software to access a computer and being able to access print either through the use of Braille or magnification devices. Wanda also listed many independent living activities including cooking, cleaning, and taking care of your home,
because those things are important skills for all adults and they can of course impact success both on and off the job. Additionally, Wanda described important skills for blind employees this way:

I feel like your attitude and your philosophy about blindness is a huge component because I can have all the skills in the world but if I think negatively about myself, or if I don't know how to travel to get from the car to get inside my work it doesn't matter what I can do on a computer. It doesn't matter if I'm a lawyer – if I can't make my way independently to that judge's bench I'm useless.

Wanda’s references to orientation and mobility and independence were echoed by other graduates, as were other skill areas. Sawyer stated some of the challenges he faces at work include accessibility of computers and transportation to and from work. The challenges are approached through accommodations such as inaccessible data being provided to him on a flash drive and his logged reports being transferred by his supervisor. For transportation he utilizes the ride share program Uber. Another graduate Henry stated that by far one of the most relevant things he gained at the school was awareness of assistive technology devices and how to use them. A very influential program for him was summer SETE where he learned a lot of practical skills related to personal finance and job-seeking. He spoke quite fondly of his public school and the strong academic foundation he received there while adding that the only place where he received instruction that was “preparing you for real life” was the school in this study.

Current students reported they learn skills in all nine areas of ECC at the school, including money management, meal planning and preparation, and organizational skills (independent living skills); orientation and mobility; assistive technology; getting along with others, learning to interact in new situations, body language: facing the speaker, extend a hand for a handshake (social skills); Braille; career education; sensory efficiency; and sports, shopping, and recreation events (recreation and leisure). For instance, David indicated he had gained knowledge and practice in social skills (both in the school and from living in the dorms),
assistive technology and orientation and mobility. Ciara who acquired a visual impairment about
two years earlier was transitioning from reading print to Braille. She had Braille class along with
several core curriculum courses in her schedule. She was also learning about careers. Ciara
shared that before coming to this school a year ago she never knew the number and variety of
jobs blind people can do. The shift from a general core curriculum only (at her public school) to
the combination of core and ECC was difficult at first but she said she adjusted within the past
year and now “it just feels normal.”

All of the staff and educational leaders stressed the role of ECC as well. It was a
recurrent topic in the superintendent’s interview responses. He mentioned the connection
between ECC areas and employment such as: social skills including social interaction and non-
verbal or body language, appropriate dress, the mechanics of a handshake, and several others;
assistive technology; and orientation and mobility. Many adult participants mentioned ECC
areas and social skills when talking about important skills for students to learn, or skills that may
be lacking that can impact employment. Yoli a teacher said:

Social skills is important . . . simple as putting your hand out and meeting your boss on
the first day, having a firm handshake, eye contact, knowing when it’s appropriate to have
a conversation that might not be work related with your supervisor. So you can have
communications about your work, but lunchtime would be an appropriate conversation to . . .
ask about family or whatever as long . . . as it’s within the realm of appropriateness. I
think yes, definitely social skills are the most important concept that should be taught.

Several noted the importance of providing instruction and experiences that lead to students
feeling comfortable and confident on the job and in social interactions at work.

Self-advocacy and self-determination subthemes emerged early during data collection
and were examined during analysis of the data. Overwhelmingly current students and graduates
efficiently articulated information about their visual diagnosis, etiology, and acuities in detail.
This is such an important skill for many reasons: personal health care, educational and
occupational accommodation needs, safety, and daily living skills among many. The ability to clearly communicate this information and do so independently and with ease happened so frequently and with such detail that it was identified as a subtheme related to ECC in terms of independent living skills, self-determination, and self-advocacy. Wanda, one of the graduates commented that being a student at a blind school, students can become “very comfortable. And that's great because everyone is like them.” She went on to say that it is also helpful for students to know there are things that people who are visually impaired would understand but the general public may not, so they may have to be explained. She gave the example that people may “look at me weird if I put my phone right up to my face” in order to use it, so if appropriate she could tell them about that. Superintendent Mustard expressed the importance of teaching students to “self-advocate for, and advocate in a professional and appropriate way as opposed to having that expectation it's going to be given to them.”

It was apparent after the second day of interviews that one’s personal attitude toward blindness was emerging as a theme. When asked about the impact of blindness on daily life or on searching for and working at a career responses often included a reference to attitude in addition to ability. One of the graduates spoke about the impact of being visually impaired: “in terms of my attitude and philosophy and things like that it really doesn't impact it any more than other physical characteristics that I have: hair color, eye color. It's just another one of those things for me.” Attitude about being self-sufficient was described by student Ernie this way: “I don't have to rely on other people to do my job for me. I did get it done, do what I'm supposed to, [then] go, and get out of there.” Another student, Flora said this:

A lot of people think that I look at my disability as a crutch or curse. And I don't really look at it that way. I just look at it as—it's a part of me and it's what I was born with and I want to use my disability to the best of my advantage. To let people know—hey, you know this is what I can do. So I rely on touch basically. I also rely on some of my vision
but not a lot. But a lot of people think being blind or legally blind is a curse. I don't want to look at my vision that way, if that makes sense.

In addition Flora said that she feels that being visually impaired could be considered a challenge, but it's only a challenge if you look at it that way. I don't always. Sure, sometimes visual impairments and other disabilities can get in the way, but I've learned that they only get in the way if you make them get in the way.

Not to be casually dismissed, as research indicated attitude can have an influence on motivation to search for a job and perform well in their career (Hergenrather et al., 2008; Shaw, et.al, 2007). Low employment rates, lack of awareness and stereotypes among employers, and other challenges can be very discouraging. One graduate said this on the subject:

> On a bigger picture level too, society has a huge role in a blind person's job search. Because a lot of times you know society will tell you—you can't get a job, or society will offer you Social Security benefits to where you don't feel like you need to go get a job. And all of that impacts whether people decide they want a job and what kind and how they're going to search for it.

The ECC was an expected theme based on the review of literature which indicates many areas of ECC are associated with employment. Nonetheless the prodigious frequency of comments and personal explanations of the connection of ECC skills to success in work experiences was intriguing and informative. Social skills, self-advocacy, orientation and mobility, assistive technology, career awareness and skills, independent living skills, and Braille were mentioned repeatedly by participants. References to ECC were so prolific they permeated data related to every research question. The volume and frequency of mentions demonstrate its importance to this group of students and reflect what previously published literature suggests about the impact of these skills on employment.

Well aware of the importance of ECC and continuously aiming to improve employment outcomes, there was clear evidence of educational leaders looking for and deliberately creating time and opportunities for instruction in these areas. This was apparent in leadership led
initiatives of curriculum updates and alignment across grade levels, addition and reallocation of staff to implement new and on-going programs, and adherence to the strategic planning processes which targeted these areas. As Principal Tish put it, “. . . we’re working to build a sequential program starting from the very bottom where we . . . have career exploration, then our day programs and summer programs that all kind of work towards that same goal of creating a student that's confident and capable.”

Student work experience program. The Student Work Experience Program also referred to as the “job program” in the Parent Student Handbook was named and described by every educational leader and staff participant as they named programs that prepare students for employment. This program provides instruction in employability skills and paid employment experiences during the regular 9-month school year. High School Principal Mr. Felipe, who was very familiar with the program, said it was “a strong school-year work program where kids are working on-campus jobs” in a variety of positions within housekeeping, maintenance, the recycling program, and the Student Center at the school where students can go to hang out and purchase snacks. Guidelines in the handbook delineated the number of hours per week students could work in on-campus jobs according to their age, and they had to meet certain criteria including academic eligibility. Requirements for off-campus jobs included all formal documentation required by the state to work and approval from parents and a principal. Only students 16 and older were eligible to work off-campus and they were required to meet with the director of the program to discuss possible job placements. In order to continue in the program students were required to maintain a level of academic eligibility. Students who wanted to work in the program received a work packet on registration day at the beginning of the school year.
which included information about required documentation to work, a Code of Conduct, Grade Code, and permission slips.

Georgetta was the teacher who coordinated the student work program the past eight years and she described the program in detail. Students were employed in jobs on-campus or off-campus or both. Job coaches were provided based on the needs of the individual student, how long they had been on the job, and if they were completing the job independently. In the evenings the job coach could be a houseparent and during the school day it could be a classroom aide or teacher. Hours of work for jobs were arranged to meet the demands of the students’ schedules. On-campus jobs included “working in our horticulture department, housekeeping, library delivery, 3D print lab, or teacher's aide over with the small children.” The hours of these jobs occurred during weekdays and evenings, and on Sunday evenings depending on student availability and frequency the job needed to occur. For instance, some students watered plants for the Horticulture department. Though watering plants could be done during the school day, there was also a need for plants to be watered on the weekend and therefore the job entailed weekend hours. Off-campus job placements for the school-year program were generally at the statewide rehabilitation agency that collaborated with the school to provide employment experiences for students. Each student was evaluated by their employer every nine weeks and the results were discussed with them. Georgetta explained that students who received a poor evaluation were placed on probationary status.

In addition to working paid jobs, each student in the program had a personal financial account at a local bank where she or he deposited paychecks and made withdrawals. Instruction in personal finance was built into the program. Other program components included filling out job applications, developing a work portfolio, and mock interviews. Spidee, now an
employment specialist, previously worked at the school as a job coach in the student job program. He named various on-campus jobs and recalled students working on employability skills in the classroom setting, saying teachers “worked on resume writing with them and . . . practiced filling out applications.” Leanne previously taught at the school 12 years and in her current role with the statewide rehabilitation agency she works with students in the school’s job programs. She explained that during the 9-month school year some students came to the production plant at the rehabilitation agency where she is located in order to get work experience:

Those students will come one day a week, two each day, Monday through Thursday. And they work mainly on the glove line, to learn job skills. I mean they—they clock in, they have to bring their lunch, then they get paid and they go on shopping trips with the high school teachers and buy groceries for the following week and things like that.

Every staff and educational leader agreed this program provides rich meaningful experiences that prepare students for employment. Georgetta told of former students who continue to keep in touch with her who work at the same rehabilitation services that hosts student workers from the school, others who work for a local grocery store chain, and many other jobs. Two-thirds of the graduates and students in the study who attended the school for the 9-month program said they gained work experience in the school-year student work experience program. Every one of these people said they learned valuable employment related skills that they continue to apply in school and work situations. When asked which educational experiences best prepared him for employment, Sawyer, one of the graduates said during his last two years of school he had a job off-campus one full day a week. He said about this experience: “I know it was just one day a week. But there—I didn't have a job coach there. I did it myself, you know. And no one's gonna watch over your shoulder and you have to do the work yourself.” Wanda worked in an on-campus job at the student center her junior and senior year. She said it was one
of the best things that prepared her for post-school employment because there is no better learning situation than a real job. She described it this way:

So for the work program during the year—that was certainly helpful in time management because I did a lot of clubs and sports and I had to work working into my schedule. I definitely think that taught me to deal with different kinds of people. . . . So being able to do customer service for different kinds of people was helpful.

In recent years most of the students enrolled in the Student Work Program were in the Life Skills or Functional Life Skills curriculum programs. These students may have needed additional semesters beyond the typical four years of high school to complete graduation requirements only be enrolled in two or three mandatory core graduation course so they have room available in their schedule. It could also be that they are enrolled in a modified curriculum and the work program is integrated into their schedule. These students are receiving focused instruction in employment skills regularly in their educational experience. Unfortunately, students in the 40-hour diploma paths participated far less frequently in the student work program, and they encountered less direct instruction in employability skills and job seeking skills. This was due to the stringent course requirements for the diploma allowing less flexibility in class scheduling. These students could work a job outside of school hours; however, interview data did not indicate how frequently they did so. School leaders and staff agreed that more often students who were enrolled in a mixed type of program path had time in their schedules to work on employability skills, job seeking skills, and the student employment program during the school year. Mr. Mustard stated that due to mandates and the intensive emphasis on core curriculum there were “limited opportunities to really home in and focus on job specific skills and the soft skills needed for employment—in the general curriculum.”

Finding time in the schedule for all of the needed instructional areas was a challenge identified in the 10-year strategic plan. The challenge was answered with multiple objectives that
identified flexible, after school, and summer programming. Other objectives include one to provide SETE year round so that more students receive work experiences and another to increase exposure to ECC from an earlier age. Educational leaders were successful in leading the charge to completing several of these objectives thus far. Students were being provided more integrated instruction in assistive technology, independent living skills, and career exploration at earlier grade levels and through high school. One full-time staff position had been added for this effort and one existing staff member was responsible for additional instruction during her regular schedule. Other teachers were integrating instruction and reinforcement of ECC employment related skills. Educational leaders had also accomplished the objective of expanding the SETE model throughout the 9-month school year. They confirmed that Sarah, who was the coordinator of the summer SETE program this year, had been appointed the full-time coordinator of the expanded school-year program and Georgetta would continue her role in the student work program as well. A formal plan of implementation was evolving at the time of this study. Sarah spoke of existing curriculum at the elementary level related to careers and shared possible additions to those. She was enthusiastic about integrating employability instruction at the high school level to a wider array of students, developing more collaborative relationships with community employers, and introducing new employers to student workers. Georgetta expressed that she was eager to teach a broader array of students to work on employability skills and personal finance:

I can work with some more of the academic kids to get them better prepared. A lot of our academic students, because they have to follow the core curriculum—working, understanding banking, a lot of the life skills that are getting us prepared, I don't think they get . . . those students who have a somewhat academic background and also have the work background are very, very successful.
Integrated opportunities related to employment skills. Oftentimes skills learned from typical daily routines can be generalized to important employability skills. All of the administrators and several staff noted that school behaviors such as punctuality to class, asking questions when you do not know something, and completing tasks on time can be learned in school and generalized. This was echoed by graduates. These everyday routine experiences should not be discounted. The importance of having high expectations for all students and requiring them to be accountable cannot be overstated.

Direct instruction in employability skills are integrated into lessons and units across areas of the curriculum. At the elementary level students had lessons in their literacy series which introduced jobs and they had exercises similar to career interest inventories. Students were responsible for assigned classroom jobs which rotated regularly. At this early stage they were receiving direct instruction in ECC components twice a week in classes. Areas of instruction included daily living skills, assistive technology, and career exploration. Ms. Tish explained that elementary students get to observe the work of school staff in different departments, then talk to the staff and ask questions about their work. She said they start young working with students:

- talking about their visual condition, talking about what that means in school, and what things they need in place so that they can be successful through the rest of their high school career and then into college. We start career planning, doing daily living classes and talking through even at this level – the whole big picture.

Recently an additional staff position was filled which is designed to focus on ECC including career awareness. In addition to the twice-weekly sessions of daily living skills and integration of ECC areas teachers plan field trips each year focused on career awareness. Ms. Tish shared that there are many naturally occurring opportunities in the existing curriculum to talk about careers and preparing for careers and the future.
Career education was integrated somewhat in middle school and high school courses. According to Sarah teachers utilized supplemental specialized job curricula like Junior Achievement and AFB career lessons. These were worked into existing curriculum plans. She said:

I believe we do a lot in terms of career awareness and exploration. I feel we could do more in the area of actual job experiences. We have the on-campus program and summer SETE as to viable and successful programs, but there is a need to extend this to more cooperative ed partnerships, job shadowing, apprenticeships, field experiences, externships, internships, paid employment off campus. We have to keep up with the latest job market and what adaptations and modification we are going to need to investigate and expose our students to before they graduate. We need to provide as much hands on experiences in a variety of careers to keep our students thinking about what they really WANT to do in their future and what they CAN do in their future.

School leaders named ongoing individualized transition planning as another area that directly helped in preparing for employment. Each student has a transition plan as part of their IEP that included goals for postsecondary education or training, independent living, and employment. Mr. Felipe explained that the school works closely with the VR counselor who comes to the campus and meets with students regularly to review their transition plans. Each student who is eligible has a case file started with that agency by the time they graduate. Cases are transferred to the rehabilitation counselor in their local area when they leave the school and move back to their home community.

**Outreach programs that target employment outcomes.** School leaders continually looked for viable solutions to the issue of time constraints and how to provide instruction in content areas each student needed. Similar to what was revealed in literature this superintendent shared that they often have to look outside the traditional school day and year. Outreach programs designed to impact transition and employment outcomes were offered on weekends.
and during summers. Some specific annual events were a weekend transition conference, one day “Reality Store,” and the summer SETE program described in the following chapter.

The school hosts a weekend transition conference when blind and visually impaired juniors and seniors and their parents spend a weekend attending sessions to learn about various subjects like higher education, vocational training programs, employment, government programs, and financial assistance. This outreach activity, like the others, is open to all eligible students in the state. At this recent event transition age students participated in sessions about transition topics while their parents attended sessions to help them prepare as well. The format of this conference varies from year to year with guest speakers representing a variety of adult service agencies or a panel of visually impaired professionals, college students, and families learning from each other about the real lived experiences of navigating higher education and employment. The event was held at a local hotel and conference site. Funding was available to support families with lodging and meals for the entire weekend, and to provide for presenters for the conference sessions.

Another event for students enrolled during the school year was the annual Reality Store which involved collaboration with other agencies and several volunteers. In this one day activity each student chose a career and lived out life “virtually” for one month on that salary, facing financial and personal decisions common in adulthood. Students had to make projections or choices such as marital status, number or children, and typical daily cuisine. They also faced unexpected windfalls or unplanned expenses. At the end of the day they assessed the outcome and reflected on the experience. Though this was not actual job experience or employability instruction it was certainly a meaningful interactive experience in which students got a taste of
the kinds of difficult decisions they may have to make as adults, and they experienced unexpected situations which they may have not encountered before nor know how to handle.

**Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to summarize programs and systems in place to prepare students for post-school employment. The main areas of emphasis of the traditional 9-month school-year program include: core curriculum, ECC, and a student work experience program. Content related to employment skills is integrated into general coursework and reinforced in both classroom and residential settings. In addition to courses offered on-site students benefit from collaborative agreements that provide opportunities to attend local public schools and the career and technical education center. In order to fit everything they need into the day sometimes student work program jobs are scheduled before and after school or on weekends. Outreach programs are an extension of the school program designed to provide much needed instruction that is difficult if not impossible to fit into a typical student schedule. One such outreach program so specifically aligned with the purpose of this study that it was explored in depth as is discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5

Student Employment Training and Experience Program (SETE): An Embedded Case

In this section the embedded case, the Student Employment Training and Experience Program or SETE is also described in detail. The SETE program is an outreach program operated through a partnership between the school and a rehabilitation organization that provided rehabilitation and training services to residents of the state who are blind or visually impaired. SETE is a unique four-week, stand-alone summer program focused on employment skills. It was designed to teach students a wide array of skills directly related to finding and keeping a job and included a daily schedule of classroom instruction, paid work experience in local businesses, volunteer experience in the community, and recreational activities in the evenings. The mission of the SETE program is stated as a combination of the goal of the rehabilitation agency which was “Creating opportunities for individuals who are blind or visually impaired” and the goal of the school “to assist a student in exiting his/her educational program with life-long living skills. We are committed to improving each student’s ability to communicate at school, work, and in the community” (From the SETE program handbook, p. 1). Both missions clearly aim to improve employment outcomes for students who are blind or visually impaired. The mission and design of the SETE program aligned to the purpose of this study so well it was explored in depth. Additionally, because of the difficulty fitting employability skills into their full academic schedule, this program was one of the primary ways some students received employment skills instruction and experience.

This provided the case within a case structure of this study. Themes that emerged included: (a) the value of the SETE program in many ways but specifically for providing real life job experiences, (b) The ability or flexibility to run a program focused intensely on
employment skills when it occurs outside the school year, and (c) collaborative relationships with community partners is beneficial to schools being successful in providing a variety of rich, meaningful, educational opportunities.

The history and evolution of the SETE program is summarized here based on review of documents and oral histories from participants. The story was interesting and illustrated school leadership and staff recognizing ever changing needs of students then working creatively within—yet when necessary, outside—the boundaries of existing programs to provide an effective response to those needs. The program originated in the early 1990s as an on-campus jobs program designed to provide students career exploration and work experiences. At that time it was operated solely by the school and conducted on site. Through the program students gained exposure to jobs in nearly every department at the school by talking to employees about their jobs, job shadowing, or working. Some student jobs were in the Student Recreation Center, administrative and school offices, switchboard, housekeeping, and maintenance. Eventually the program evolved into a separate summer employment program; first it was part of the existing summer school focused on academics, then transformed into its present day primary focus of employment skills with supplementary instruction and activities utilizing core academic skills. During the time of transformation the partnership between the school and the rehabilitation agency formed. This partnership provided a framework and established the division of resources which enabled the program to function and flourish in its current-day four-week-long format. Staff shared that in the early years of SETE only about six students participated with the support of two job coaches. Now 30 students participate annually and 15 job coaches work the program.
SETE Planning and Organization

Planning meetings for this annual 4-week summer program occur regularly on a year-round basis among school administrators, program coordinators, and employment specialists. As stated previously fiscal and human resources for SETE were divided between the two entities. Documents and interviews provided information on that matter, which is summarized briefly here. Meals, lodging, morning, and evening supervision, and any necessary medical services such as first aid or medication dispensing were provided by the school. The rehabilitation agency provided several student job placements, including some at their own sites (switchboard, production line, cafeteria, and a few others), use of a computer lab for instruction (resume writing, career interest inventory, goal writing, reflection of the week, etc.), and collaborative program planning and implementation. Staff from the rehabilitation agency filled important roles including managing student payroll, monitoring student progress, organizing student tours of the company’s site, and describing the resources they provide.

Securing job placements for this summer program was the responsibility of employment specialists Spidee and Leanne, who worked for the rehabilitation agency. They worked with local business to arrange student job placements prior to the program each summer. In the process they contacted employers and explained the purpose and format of SETE program, answered questions, and provided informational resources or tours of the company. The employment specialists were continuously scouting for new student jobs and employment partners in an effort to provide a variety of work experiences for students. However, many employers had been involved repeatedly with some hosting SETE students 10 consecutive years or more. The jobs were located in the urban setting and outlying suburbs and towns where the school was located. In any given year as many as 12 different community businesses hosted
student workers during the SETE program, with some of them hosting several students at a time. Some of the student jobsites were at businesses that ran as community volunteer programs while others were small businesses or large corporations. Regardless of the type of business (even those where other workers were volunteers), all SETE students were paid minimum wage for the hours they worked and received a paycheck each Friday afternoon. To the extent possible students were matched to a job related to their transition plan career goal or some other stated area of interest. This year there were 10 cooperating businesses and some of the businesses offered multiple job placements. For instance, one business had positions at the switchboard, company retail store, production line, and employee food services. Site visits and observations for this study were conducted in 4 of the 10 job sites plus one other business which had served as a job site in previous years.

School staff were responsible for supervision, instruction, planning, and implementing the daily schedule outside of work time, and day to day needs of students. Teachers from the school worked as job coaches, driving students to and from their jobs daily, conducting functional vision assessments at the job sites, and assisting students in learning the job then gradually decreasing their help and presence over the course of the program. Two teachers from the school were designated as co-leaders and were responsible for many things: arranging instructional activities and materials for classroom based instruction, field trips, or speakers; monitoring students’ weekly goals in conjunction with the job coaches; and these co-leaders were also job coaches at work sites. Another teacher served as the Program Coordinator and was responsible for managing the entire program to ensure day to day operations ran smoothly and that students had meaningful experiences. The coordinator visited every job site at least once to observe student workers, discuss any concerns of job coaches, and speak to business staff or
management involved with the SETE student to hear any concerns or commendations. Mr. Felipe, the high school principal who was the administrator directly involved with the program, was available as needed and he was present during some sessions both to meet with staff and to observe.

Students age 16-21 with a visual impairment who live in the state are eligible to attend. The handbook indicated additional requirements were that each participant needed to: exhibit age appropriate independent, daily living, and social interaction skills; use safe orientation and mobility skills to travel; be committed to participating the duration of the program (all four weeks); and the ability to work cooperatively with program staff in work and classroom activities. The SETE Handbook stated that the program “offers a well-balanced schedule of classroom learning, experience in a real world job, and fun recreational activities” (From the SETE program handbook). One does not have to be enrolled as a student at the school during the school year to be eligible to attend SETE. During this particular session 20 of the 30 participants were enrolled during the year. The remaining 10 were not currently; however, one of them had attended the school in the past.

The program operated a total of four weeks. There were two weeks of attendance in late June, a one week break during the week of the July 4 holiday, then it resumed the following two weeks. Every week families dropped off their students at the dorm on Sunday evening and they stayed on campus until Friday afternoon when their families returned to take them home for the weekend. There were a few exceptions of students who were dropped off and picked up every day. The schedule emulated as closely as possible the real scenario of being responsible for getting yourself up, ready, going to work, and performing a job according to a set of required expectations.
SETE Curriculum Work Experience

Each week students went to work Monday through Thursday for about six hours each day. On Fridays they worked on job seeking and employment skills such as preparing (or updating in the case of returning students) their portfolio, completing interest or skill inventories, and practicing interview skills. Students were expected to wake up and get ready independently. They knew weeks in advance of arriving to the program where they would be working. They were informed of any applicable dress code for their job (based on guidelines set by each business) and they were responsible for dressing according to employer expectations. Once up and dressed they came to the school cafeteria by the specified time for breakfast which was prepared for them. After breakfast they went to an adjoining room to hear announcements related to the day’s schedule. Soon after they each went to their assigned vehicle and rode to work. Once at the worksite students performed the duties assigned by the employers as they worked alongside other employees doing the same or similar tasks. Job coaches remained at the worksite. These job coaches were required to learn the jobs themselves and during the first week of the program they were busy training students the layout of the work location and how to do the job. Job coaches gradually interacted less with students over the course of the program as the students became more independent in their work.

The school provided food for students to prepare a lunch to take to work each day. Late every afternoon the students went through an assembly line type of process to make a sandwich, select chips, other sides and a beverage, then placed it in their personalized bag to be stored in a refrigerator and taken to work the following day. This appeared to be an efficient process which students completed mostly independently. Some students worked at sites where they could purchase lunch either in vending machines or in a cafeteria so they did not have to prepare a
lunch. A graduate, Sawyer, indicated he would recommend having lunch planning and 
preparation become more of an integrated life skills activity of the SETE program. He suggested 
students make individual grocery lists then go to a grocery store to purchase food rather than 
lunch preparation simply be a selection of food items laid out for them. In the evenings students 
cooked in the dorms.

SETE participants shared their learning experiences. Excerpts of interviews were the 
most convincing evidence of the significance of this program. Caitlyn said, “I've learned to work 
like an actual job. And it's taught me that if I put my mind to it then I can do it” Terrance said he 
had never had any job experience before coming to this program. In addition to telling about the 
specific duties he performed at his job he said he learned other important things like “we have to 
be careful. We have forklift drivers . . . We have to stay inside the yellow line so we don't get 
hurt . . . look both ways before we cross like the aisle—that has no yellow line. It's kind of 
dangerous.” When asked about his daily routine another student Ernie shared this:

I get to work about 9:30, I go to the lunchroom, put our lunch in the frig, then we go 
straight to the table where we get set up . . . they explain to us what we're supposed to do. 
And then we just get started. So we have to run through it a few times, get a little practice 
on it and then we'll be all set to go . . . We're not always doing the same stuff. We're 
always switching up stuff. So sometimes like the other day I had to go back and forth 
because I had to carry some stuff back to the table and back to the boxes. So that was 
pretty cool for me because like I said I don't like to do the same stuff every day. I like to 
learn new things. So it's a great opportunity for the job coaches to show me what I could do, 
because it helps me be more independent—not have people to rely on to do things for me.

Sawyer, one of the graduates, said that SETE had a great influence on helping him be prepared 
for employment: “It really prepared you for what it's going to be like to be at an all day job. You 
got your job coach, you get up, make your own lunch . . . it really showed you what it would be 
like.”

Wanda, another graduate, talked about soft skills she learned during this program:
Probably the biggest thing I learned from [SETE] actually was how to be productive when there's not something for you to do . . . taking initiative and going to your work supervisor and saying—hey can I help you do this, or do you need this, or whatever. Because I think sometimes in certain settings folks aren't sure what a blind person can do, and so they give you less work than you can do. So not only doing that work well—but finding other things and making yourself useful is probably the biggest thing.

While everyone indicated they gained a lot from the program, they did not all suggest it was entirely fun or easy. Some students found that a summer job, just like a full-time career, can be hard. Not surprisingly some students shared challenges, yet they still embraced the experience. Nemo was working in a job that required him to use computer skills which he identified as an area in which he was not proficient:

With the work I'm doing now I am scanning things into a computer. So I'm not good with computer skills but I know if I keep on working at it and ask for help when I need it then I seem to be picking up on how to scan things in the computer.

Another student Ciara said she learned from her SETE job that she did not enjoy what she thought she wanted to do for a lifelong career:

I knew what I wanted to do with my life, career-wise. But I didn't know like more about it . . . I'm doing the YMCA child care. So I want to be a teacher. And I thought that I wanted it to be an elementary teacher . . . NOPE, not for me. So I found out that I definitely want to teach secondary.

These summer job experiences benefitted current and former students in a broad manner of ways. Without SETE, if they had ever had work experiences to learn from it would likely have been without the support of a whole staff of job coaches, teachers, and others who all had a background working with people who are visually impaired.

**SETE Curriculum: Classroom and Community Instruction**

Students did not report to worksites on Fridays. Instead the schedule consisted of intentionally planned instructional activities focused on employment skills. Topics included social interaction relevant to work, and development of many job seeking tools and skills such as
building a portfolio. The program coordinator Sarah said that during the program each student developed a portfolio:

which includes a resume, cover letter, career assessments (O*NET), interview practice sheet and feedback sheet from mock interview, an ability statement, eye condition research, SMART goals for transition planning, a MY FUTRE reflection essay, an employment worksheet to include health information, insurance, emergency contact, references, etc., examples of thank you letters, and letters of recommendation from their employers.

During the study I had several opportunities to observe students working on their portfolios. Those who had attended in previous years updated their portfolio already on file, whereas first-year students were starting from the beginning. Students who were more adept with the software application used for portfolio building helped peers near them who required assistance. Students teaching or helping their peers served to reinforce their own skills and confidence. Henry, one of the graduates, said among the many things he learned in SETE was how to develop and update a job portfolio. “I still have that portfolio,” he said. He took that updated portfolio when he interviewed for his first job as a physical therapist. “When I interviewed I brought in my portfolio from SETE—because I've been using it ever since. It was a great tool.” He mentioned many other job seeking and employment skills he learned in SETE:

A lot of things like—oh this is how an interview works. These are the kind of questions they're going to ask you. This is how to prepare for it. This is how you answer the questions about your vision and how to deal with that. This is how you request adaptations. So a lot of things that—don't get me I mean don't get me wrong—I loved my public high school . . . It was wonderful. But I don't think they were very good at preparing you for real life. And this [SETE] was preparing you for real life. I learned a lot from [public school] academically but not—the SETE program really gave me a lot of that like – oh this is how life works. This is what's gonna happen.

Self-determination and self-advocacy were other areas emphasized during instruction. Both were addressed specifically in activities and they were also integrated into every day routine events. Each week every student worked with their job coach to set individual goals that
were specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound, also known as *SMART* goals. A few observations were conducted of students and staff evaluating progress on SMART goals and deciding on goals for the next week. Some students’ goals were related to learning to travel more independently at their worksite, some were to complete a greater quantity or variety of work, and there were many others. Rarely, but when necessary, the staff steered students to a clearer goal statement to ensure it was a SMART goal. They used a goal setting worksheet to guide and monitor progress. The worksheet included planning action steps, monitoring, telling why the goal was important, and setting a deadline for achieving the goal. Every Friday students evaluated progress toward their goals and established goals for the coming week.

Independent living skills were a main focus of instruction as well. Lessons on budgeting, banking, and taxes were more meaningful after the first payday when students had a real paystub to look at when considering living expenses for rent, groceries, and leisure activities. Field trips to local college campuses and work training programs increased student awareness of those programs. They had opportunities to tour and ask questions. Independent living skills were reinforced in the dormitory setting. One evening each week a group of students planned and cooked an entire meal. Meal preparation rotated through groups so that everyone participated. Every year a service learning project was incorporated. One Friday this particular year they toured and volunteered at a community farm where they learned about food deserts and how this local business partnered with volunteers to plant, maintain, and harvest over 200 tons of produce for food insecure individuals in the surrounding area. SETE students learned about the need for such a service and they all planted seeds while they were there. Experiences such as this inform students of community resources but also of opportunities to volunteer and give back to the community.
Evaluative Components of the SETE Program

The outcomes or successes of the program were measured by a combination of data based on individual students and the program in general. Each student received evaluation feedback weekly from her or his employer. With support from staff, students designed and monitored personalized SMART goals each week. Both SMART goal and weekly job evaluation results were shared with each student’s IEP team to document work toward transition goals and indicate areas of accomplishment and need. These results were also shared with the assigned VR counselor. Another impressive artifact was letters of recommendation from employers to student workers. Not every student worker received this level of recognition, and those who did considered the letters valued additions to their work portfolio. Sarah, the SETE coordinator described one other evaluative piece as video clips recorded of each student at their job site used for evaluative purposes and to demonstrate their accomplishments. She also said that at the conclusion of the four-week SETE program there is a luncheon for families, program staff, and employers. At the luncheon students “share about their experiences. This is probably the best artifact of all to show the success of the program.”

Participants in the study were asked specifically about recommendations for improvements, enhancements, or for future programming. Nearly all of the staff and educational leaders and many of the students said they would like to see SETE expanded into a year-round program rather than just four weeks in the summer. Some would like to see an increase in number and variety of job sites. Mr. Mustard and Mr. Felipe both said a goal would be that after a successful summer job placement with a student the local business would hire her or him for part time work a couple of days or evenings a week during the school year. A few students indicated they needed more practice interviewing and would like to see additional mock
interviews built into the schedule. One other specific suggestion which was mentioned earlier was to expand instruction in independent living skills by including meal planning, grocery shopping, and meal preparation by allotting students a budget for food and support in shopping and cooking. Other than the recommendation about meal planning the remainder of these suggestions will be either fully or partially accomplished during the upcoming school year.

**SETE: Impact and Opportunities**

Interview responses were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of the SETE program. Every student and graduate indicated they gained valuable knowledge, skills, and meaningful experiences in SETE. Students and graduates all articulated details about what they learned that helped prepare them for employment and every graduate said they still use the skills they learned in SETE, both when looking for a job and in their current jobs. Though there were two students who indicated they did not feel their SETE job challenged them and one indicated it was not a good fit because it was not what he wanted to do for a career, both students recognized that they were still gaining work experience and it would add to their portfolio. For the majority of the students who attended, this summer SETE job was their only work experience. Graduates stated if not for participating in SETE they would not have had anything to enter in the work history portion of their resume. As a graduate and an employment specialist both put it, if it was not for SETE most of these students would have an empty resume and no job history to talk about at a job interview.

Educational leaders and staff alike voiced a strong belief in the effectiveness of the program. Several of them recalled specific students through the years, how they grew in the program, and what career path they followed. Mr. Mustard stated, “we've run the SETE program . . . 20 years at least. And . . . it's a win for the employers. And so I think we're making
headway. We're giving kids experiences. Kids are employed. They're making money.” One of the employment specialists said:

It helps tremendously and I've seen that—working with clients that have graduated from the program and from the school. An example is [a client] he graduated a year ago. And so he graduates high school he comes to us says I want to find a job. Without this SETE program which he was involved three or four years, his resume would have been blank. So this opportunity, this experience, provides . . . jobs they might not get while they're in high school . . . .These kids you know with no support like us or you know, knowing how to advocate . . . I don't think any of these kids would be working. They would have a hard time finding jobs while they're in high school . . . . I remember walking into an interview with—with the client and you know we had a whole list of things to talk about instead of nothing. . . . It isn't a long program but you know it is working experience and they gain from it.

**Employer Experiences and Observations**

Participants uniformly spoke of potential employers’ lack of knowledge, anxiety, and generalized stereotypes impeding the hiring process for a blind person. The frequency this concept occurred was in the top fourth of the original codes. Educational leaders and staff, VR staff, and graduates indicated potential employers appear apprehensive and uncomfortable around job seekers who are blind or visually impaired, unsure how to act themselves or what to expect from a blind employee. Some suggested employers may be concerned about what accommodations the applicant would need and the time and cost involved in getting those things in place. Others said they expect employers are wary of liability issues due to injury. This theme was pervasive not just from school officials but also from VR staff working with both transition age students and adults who are blind. Spidee perceives it is the biggest issue he and his customers face. Of particular interest on this topic were experiences shared by the two employers James and Grant as they elaborated on supervising and working with employees who were blind or visually impaired. Their descriptions of initial perceptions, subsequent observations, and years of experience were a valuable contribution to the data. Some overarching themes that
emerged in data included: students and graduates of the school and SETE are well prepared and eager to work, when people who are visually impaired get a job they tend to keep it a long time and potential areas to focus on include conflict resolution and adjusting to change.

James’ first experience meeting someone who was visually impaired was seven years prior to this study when he was first approached by an employment specialist about hosting a SETE student. He had never had any interaction with a blind person but agreed to visit this specialized school to learn about the SETE program. After that he visited and toured the rehabilitation agency that collaborates with the school during the school year and for SETE. At both the school and the agency, he witnessed people who were blind and visually impaired working, learning, and going about their daily lives capably and independently. In the past seven years James hosted five SETE students and hired one of those as a full-time employee after he graduated. When asked if he noticed a difference in the job seeking or employment habits of visually impaired workers compared to their sighted peers he said: “They're more ambitious. They're more positive. They don't let their vision impairment get in the way.” When asked to explain what he meant about “more ambitious” he said “They want to thrive more. They want to prove [themselves]. They have a positive attitude, willing to learn, not afraid to go to the next level.” One of his earliest interns Kevin opened his own computer repair shop in his mother’s garage after interning with James. After Kevin graduated from high school he applied for a job and was hired by James. James spoke with pride about Kevin:

He is the longest employee here. So this company will be 10 next year, next October. And he's been with me for seven of those 10 years. So I don't let any type of handicap block or let me misjudge on how they work. Because I could say he's been one of my best employees too.

Grant, the other employer, had never interacted with people who were blind or visually impaired until working at the rehabilitation agency where he had now worked for 12 years. As he
explained, the mission of the agency is to create employment opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired in an effort to reduce the 70% unemployment rate nationally. He said in this state the unemployment rate is 62% for this group. Later a review of online statistics was conducted by the researcher to verify this information. Cornell University Disability Statistics indicated the employment rate for people with a visual impairment in this state was 41.6% in 2016 (± 3.96 margin of error) (Cornell University, 2018). Since coming to work here Grant has worked with numerous people who are blind. When asked about his observations of job-seeking strategies of this group, he said that frequently job seekers with a visual impairment struggle with what, when, and how much they should divulge to a prospective employer about their disability. He said they have trouble deciding on how much information they give the employer and at what time and what stage of the interviewing process they give that information. So when you talk to 10 people you probably get 10 different recommendations or answers on the best way to approach that. So when you decide to disclose or not disclose your disability is probably a key difference because folks without don't have to worry about that.

Grant agreed that lack of knowledge about blindness and a general awkwardness and nervousness is a barrier for employers. He spoke easily and knowledgably about accommodations for visually impaired and blind employees such as offering human guide in an unfamiliar setting, adaptive computer software, and sending visual presentations in electronic format in advance of meetings so employees can access them on a personal digital device. He said the agency has great employees who are committed and loyal and there is a very low turnover rate. In response to a question about whether they stay in the same position he explained that the company has an upward mobility program through which individual employees who wish to learn additional skills or advance to a different position set goals and work toward them.
This is monitored and updated at least annually through the company’s strategic planning process.

Both employers in this study had employed students from the school in student jobs and as full-time employees. They described their employees as well prepared to work, hard-working, and dedicated to their jobs. James and Grant both experienced low turnover rates among their employees who were blind or visually impaired. When asked about skill areas of need observed for the students, they named very few including conflict resolution and dealing with change. Arguably these skills are helpful for all employees and not areas specifically related to blindness. However, it is helpful to note these are skills to include in employability preparation programs.

**SETE Conclusion**

The summer SETE program was a well-developed program that provided students from the state an opportunity to develop job seeking skills, employability skills, and real work experience. SETE is a product of collaborative relationships between the case school, the rehabilitation agency, and multiple area employers. One of the benefits of this program being offered in the summer was the ability to have the primary focus of learning be on employability and job experience while supporting these areas with academic and social learning activities. During the school year the emphasis would have to be just the opposite, with the primary focus being on academics and little time available for work experiences or employability skills. Because SETE focusses solely on employment skills and experiences it was an ideal program to highlight as an embedded case for this study. Yet the SETE program was but one 4-week outreach program offered by this school. In order to get a full picture, all of the programs and components in place at the school must be taken into consideration.
Chapter 6
Cumulative Summary of Research Findings and Conclusions

This chapter contains a review and summary of the findings of how this specialized school for the blind is preparing students for post school employment. It focuses on the experiences of school leadership as they strive to meet the needs of blind and visually impaired students throughout the entire state – not just those who attend the school during the year – and as they continuously aim to impact employment outcome statistics. The chapter will begin with a review of the research questions and related findings. Subsequently the findings will be tied back to existing literature. Next, connections between findings and the framework of social capital and social networks will be discussed. Implications and recommendations for educational leaders are presented in the following section. The chapter ends with recommendations for future research.

Revisiting the Research Questions

Research question 1: What systems do specialized schools for the blind have in place to prepare students for post school employment? The case school maintains a robust focus on academic achievement and strong commitment to teaching core curriculum. There is also heavy emphasis and commitment to instruction in all areas of ECC. In addition to Core and Expanded Core there are two distinct programs focusing employment preparation. Both provide instruction in employment related skills and include real work experience. There are other brief day and weekend outreach programs that provide education and activities focused on transition to post-secondary education and careers. Flora who had become visually impaired in the past two years
had only attended this school for one year. Prior to this year she attended a general education program in a public school. She said:

Here at [this school] the teachers and everything are like focused on what you're going to do after you get out of here. So it’s like every day in class you hear something about—oh this will help you for this . . . after you get out of here, or this is why you need to learn this, so you know what you want to do after [school] . . . In my public school growing up I never heard that. . . . It was like nothing about jobs or careers or anything. Here it's like that's all they talk about. So they're focused on careers and jobs and college and stuff like that.

Research question 2: What are the experiences and observations of educational leaders and individuals who worked with students through an educational, rehabilitation, or employment perspective? The educational leaders know their students, their needs, rates of employment outcomes, and skills associated with improved outcomes. The high expectations of educational leaders are mirrored by school faculty and staff. These leaders are driven to provide educational opportunities to impact outcomes for their students. Some common themes that were noted included observations that in general visually impaired students are eager to learn and work and visually impaired employees tend to stay employed at the same job for a long time, resulting in a low turnover rate.

Research question 3: What are the job search and employment experiences of graduates who are blind/visually impaired and where do they perceive they learned these skills? All of the graduates indicted they utilized skills they gained in the student work experience program and in SETE when job seeking and in their careers. All of the graduates utilized their social networks when job seeking. Most students and graduates in the study reported the only job experience they ever had occurred either in the school year student work program or summer SETE. Every student who participated in these programs shared a positive, detailed account of how they learned and practiced job seeking skills, ECC related to employment, and gained employment experience. Henry graduate (now physical therapist) spoke
quite fondly of his public school and the strong academic foundation he received there while adding that the only place where he received instruction that was “preparing you for real life” was the school in this study.

**Research question 4: What are the implications and challenges for educational leaders when evaluating programs, developing curriculum, and influencing programs or individualized education?**

At this school continuous school improvement is driven by a strategic plan which includes long and short term objectives and is monitored and updated regularly. This strategic plan is used as a guide in decision making. Having an established plan not only guided the direction of progress it also documented accomplishments. Many of the objectives in the plan had already been completed and the superintendent indicated it was time to begin working on an updated plan. A challenge for educational leaders was the time restriction in student schedules when planning for instruction ECC and employability skills and work experiences. This time constraint was multiplied by the stringent state requirements for a student to be considered a graduate. Another challenge noted was negative attitude of employers impacting opportunities for student work experience and in hiring blind or visually impaired employees.

**Tying Findings Back to the Literature**

Overall the school has programs in place that provide instruction in academic content, employability skills, and technical skills (in the focused employment programs). These are the three skills areas included in the model of college and career readiness described by Stone and Lewis. Furthermore, the dual emphasis on a strong core academic foundation along with instruction in skills specific to blindness provides opportunities for students to develop in areas
associated with employment outcomes for this group (Conners, Curtis, Emerson, & Dormitorio, 2014; Fields, 2004; McDonnall, 2011). Graduates reported using the employment related skills and tools they developed in school employment programs when looking for a job and at their jobs. Since instruction in these skills has been associated with employment in adulthood, this emphasizes the importance of teaching employability skills (Conners, Curtis, Emerson, & Dormitorio, 2014; Crudden, 2011; Fields, 2004). Work experience has been associated with positive employment outcomes (Conners, Curtis, Emerson, & Dormitorio, 2014; McDonnall & Crudden, 2009) and many of the students and graduates conveyed the only work experience they had was through one of the programs at the school.

Key ways that educational leaders impact student achievement include having a school wide plan with goals and objectives that are monitored regularly, having high expectations for instruction and learning, knowing the students and their needs, and being knowledgeable of curriculum (Agular-Nuno, 2012; Benz, Lindstrom, Unruh, Waintrup, 2004; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009). All of these factors exist in the case school. The school has a school wide improvement plan that educational leaders adhere to and regularly update. Leaders know the students and their needs, and they are familiar with curriculum areas associated with positive employment outcomes. The high expectations of educational leaders are mirrored by school faculty and staff. The challenges faced by these administrators including difficulty finding time in schedule for ECC, is a struggle that has often led other school leaders to develop instructional opportunities in these areas outside of the school schedule (Agran, Hong, & Blankenship, 2007; Huebner, Merk-Adam, Stryker, Wolffe, 2004; Lohmeier, Blankenship, & Hatlen, 2009; Sapp & Hatlen 2010). Similarly, the challenge of dealing with negative attitudes of employers has been identified many times as a barrier to
employment for people who are blind and visually impaired, and researchers have encouraged additional studies into developing responses to this problem (Cruden, Sansing, & Butler, 2005; Shaw, Gold, & Wolfe, 2007).

**Connecting Findings to Social Capital and Social Network Theory**

Social networks can and do provide access to a great deal of information and resources from which people can benefit, including learning about career opportunities. All four of the graduates in this study utilized connections in their social networks when seeking employment. However, in order to experience these benefits one must first have a well-developed network and the social interaction skills to access it. Unfortunately, research has shown that people with disabilities have smaller social networks (Kulkarni, 2012; Potts, 2005; Roy, Dimigen, & Taylor, 1998) and many visually students need instruction in the ECC area of social interaction skills. Assuring students receive instruction in this and all areas of the ECC is an important responsibility of educational leaders of programs serving students who are blind or visually impaired. Considering the great potential value social networks afford, it is important that students be intentionally taught about them. This may include the concept of how they work and how to develop and maintain these connections. Given the interconnectedness of the world today through technology and the common use of digital social network platforms the concept and functioning of traditional social networks may be easy to demonstrate.

**Implications and Recommendations for Educational Leaders**

The case offers implications for educational leaders serving specialized schools for the blind, for educational leaders serving in other settings who seek to better understand and improve educational experiences for this group of students, and for policy makers who seek to understand
the educational needs of blind and visually impaired students in order to better inform their
decision making around policy. First, the college and career model of Stone and Lewis (2012)
posits that instruction in three skill areas is the key to success: academic content, employability
skills, and technical skills. Students who are blind and visually impaired must possess ECC skills
(such as Braille literacy or use of equipment such as magnifiers, abacus, talking calculators, etc.)
in order to read or gain access to instructional materials, move independently around the school
through the day in a typical high school schedule (orientation and mobility skills), and interact
with teachers and peers (social interaction skills). For this reason, I suggest for these students
that instruction in four skill areas is the key to success: academic content, expanded core content,
employability skills, and technical skills. Though it could be argued that employability skills is
already included in the ECC, that instruction typically addresses disability specific skills and
may not encompass all of the content matter included in general curriculum.

Next, the study suggests that in this state the current requirements to be considered a
graduate do not take into consideration the additional instructional needs of this population of
students, nor the additional time needed to provide the instruction. The skills in the nine areas of
the ECC include skills that are essential in order for students simply to gain access to the general
curriculum, such as Braille and assistive technology, as well as skills that the sighted student
typically learns through visual observation such as social interaction skills and numerous others.
Research has indicated the importance of this expanded curriculum for blind and visually
impaired students (Hatlen, 1996; Lohmeier, Blankenship, and Hatlen, 2009; Sapp & Hatlen,
2010; Wolfe & Kelly, 2011). State requirements for graduation need to consider the need for
additional instruction in disability specific areas of the ECC and provide allowances for this
including allowing additional time (if necessary) beyond four years to complete all of the
required coursework and still be considered a graduate. The educational leaders in this study were working hard to provide learning opportunities in all areas needed by the students and they were successful in several of these efforts however their hands were tied in many ways when trying to work everything into a typical four year high school student’s schedule and still meet the course requirements and time constraints to be considered a graduate.

The findings of this study lead to the following recommendations for educational leaders. The problem of finding time for instruction in employability skills and ECC areas is not new (Agran, Hong, & Blankenship, 2007; Lohmeier, Blankenship, & Hatlen, 2009; Sapp & Hatlen 2010) but appears to be magnified in the case in this study. Leaders must continuously search for, intentionally create, and support opportunities to deliver instruction in requisite specialized skills areas of the ECC and employability skills. This can be opportunities to integrate instruction into existing curriculum as well as in time frames and platforms outside the traditional school schedule. The case school provides programs including employment skills training and work experience both during school time and through an outreach program during the summer. One factor that makes it difficult to find time for instruction in employability skills and other areas of the ECC is student schedules (Lohmeier, Blankenship, & Hatlen, 2009; Sapp & Hatlen 2010) and in this study high school course schedules and timelines were dictated by state policy. Policy makers need to be informed of the essential instructional needs of blind and visually impaired students in addition to core academic areas. They need to be aware of the impact of educational policy and legislation on this group of students. Educational leaders should investigate methods of informing policy makers and consider involving other stakeholder groups in this effort. Lastly, school leaders must be proactive in addressing negative attitudes of potential employers by seeking out opportunities to inform them of their students’ capabilities,
related research on employee longevity, explanations about accommodations, and attend to other questions or concerns they may have. One way to approach this would be developing a training for employers with basic information, paired with interactions with adults who are visually impaired and employed. It may be effective to organize other stakeholders in these efforts, such as students, graduates, VR counselor, and employers who have worked with blind employees.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The course schedules of secondary students are typically driven by state graduation requirements. This primary emphasis on core academic content instruction, while crucial sometimes indirectly overshadows or dismisses the importance of essential instructional skill areas that are disability related, such as the ECC. It would be worthwhile to investigate similarities and differences in how states address the specific needs of students who are blind or visually impaired and specifically how they incorporate the ECC. Additionally, social networks can and do provide access to a great deal of information and resources from which people can benefit. However, in order to experience these benefits one must first have a social network and the skills to access it. Simply put social networks introduce inequity as well as opportunity. Future studies could examine the characteristics of social networks of blind and visually impaired individuals, taking into account factors as family status, education of parents, income level and other factors that can influence ones access to networks. Furthermore, negative attitudes of employers are a barrier to employment that has been identified in the literature and in this study. This is a topic that deserves further research, perhaps examining the basis of attitudes, exploring existing promising efforts to alleviate this barrier, or developing and implementing an intervention and investigating the results.
Conclusion

This case study explored the programs in place at one specialized school for blind students and the experiences of school leaders as they provide and support instruction in identified all skill areas related to employment for these students. The study reinforces the importance of instruction in core academics areas, ECC, employability skills instruction, and job experiences. Both core and expanded core areas were factors associated with blind adults who were employed (Bell, 2010; Bell & Mino, 2013) and employment training and preparation programs were as well (McMahon, Wolfe, Wolfe, & Brooker 2013). The struggle experienced by school administrators to fit instruction in all of the relevant components into a school day or into four years of high school was not uncommon. In an effort to provide instruction in all vital content areas this case provided several learning opportunities outside regular school hours and in the summer, which was also reported at similar schools (Lohmeier, 2005). The practices of the leadership team of the case school illustrated the power of having an agreed upon well-defined set of schoolwide goals to guide daily as well as programming decisions provides a sense of direction and clear method of measuring progress.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Semi Structured Educational Leader Interview Protocol

Programs Designed to Prepare Blind and Visually Impaired Secondary Students for Employment: An Embedded Case Study

Date/Time: ____________________________________________________

Interviewee (Name and Pseudo-Name): ____________________________________________________

Interviewer: ____________________________________________________

Post-Interview Comments/Leads/Notes:

Introductory Protocol: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! I expect this interview will last around 60 minutes. During the interview I have several topics I would like to discuss including basic information about yourself, programs at the [school name] and also about your experiences related to your influence as an educational leader. This is a semi-structured interview which means the goal is for you to talk openly and freely about your experiences. I will be referring to a list of prepared questions to direct the interview and it may be necessary at some points for me to interrupt you in order to get to all of the key questions.

After we talk today if you have any questions about the research you can contact me directly at 217-248-9937 or spres2@illinois.edu or Anjale Welton at ajwelton@illinois.edu. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

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<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
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<td>DEMOGRAPHIC:</td>
<td>1. Briefly list your educational degrees and licenses/certificates.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I want to ask you some basic background questions to start off.”</td>
<td>2. Have you completed training specifically to prepare you to work with people who are blind or visually impaired?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a. Probes - If so please describe.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Formal, informal, on the job training, etc.</td>
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<td>3. About how long have you worked with students who are blind or visually impaired?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a. Probes – how long as an educational administrator?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. What kinds of leadership positions?</td>
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<td>VISION and MISSION</td>
<td>4. What is your vision about employment outcomes for students who are B/VI?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>5. What are your impressions about the impact of programming at [the site school] on the employment outcomes of graduates?</td>
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**OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS of K-12 Education Programs and Curriculum**

“Next I want to talk about your observations and perceptions of K-12 education programs and curriculum.”

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| 6. | What curricular programs does your school have in place to prepare students for employment?  
   a. Probes – separate/employability specific course, skills integrated into general/CTE courses, units, vocational specific, etc.  
   b.   |
| 7. | Besides specific courses in the curriculum, what other programs does your school have or participate in that prepares students for employment?  
   a. Probes – SETE, student work program, ECC, etc  
   b.   |
| 8. | Do you partner or collaborate with other agencies to provide instruction and reinforcement of employment skills? (Probes – VR, CILs, LEAs) If so please describe these programs.  
   a.   |
| 9. | What perception do you have of where people learn employment related skills?  
   a.   |
| 10. | What employment related skills do you think could be taught or learned in high school?  
   a.   |
| 11. | Discuss specific types of employability skills it is important to teach to students who are blind or visually impaired.  
   a. Probes – skills similar to non-disabled and sighted peers  
   b. Skills different from peers who are sighted  
   c.   |
| 12. | When it comes to employability and job seeking skills instruction what similarities or differences have you noticed in curriculum for students with visual impairments compared to curricula for other students?  
   a.   |

**OBSERVATION AND PERCEPTION OF JOB SEEKING AND EMPLOYABILITY PREPARATION**

“In this set of questions I would like to discuss your observation and perception of job seeking and employability preparation”

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| 13. | If you have had an opportunity to observe your students or graduates engaged in job seeking strategies and employment describe your observations.  
   a. Probes: Have you observed any differences in the job seeking strategies used by people who are visually impaired compared to their sighted peers?  
   b. What if any particular employment related skills do you perceive are strengths of the VI students you have observed?  
   c. What if any employment related skills do you perceive were underdeveloped in VI students you observed?  
   d. Discuss the job seeking strategies used by student job seekers in terms of what strategies were helpful or not helpful.  
   e.   |
| 14. | Discuss the experiences your students and alumni have shared with you about getting a job.  
   a. Probes – data on current students or alumni, informal communications from alumni, etc  
   b. Probes – barriers, helpful skills, etc  
   c.   |
| 15. | What are your impressions of the overall employment rate of people who are blind or visually impaired?  
   a.   |

**INFLUENCE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADER**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</table>
| 16. | What practices are in place at the school to build commitment to ongoing school improvement?  
   a.   |
| 17. | In your role as a school leader how effective do you perceive your  
   a.   |
The last few questions are about the influence of an educational leader.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>How are best practices and/or new initiatives shared with staff?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Describe your experiences such as successes or barriers you have encountered related to influencing, implementing, or changing programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Discuss what barriers exist to revising school curriculum and programs if any changes are needed to better address employment preparation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>21. Do you have additional information about the topic you would like to share?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Closing Script:

Thank you for participating in this study. I will contact you in the future to review the written transcript of our conversation today so that you can verify the accuracy.
Semi Structured Employer Interview Protocol

Programs Designed to Prepare Blind and Visually Impaired Secondary Students for Employment: An Embedded Case Study

Date/Time: ____________________________________________________
Interviewee (Name and Pseudo-Name):__________________________________________________
Interviewer: ___________________________________________________
Post-Interview Comments/Leads/Notes:  _______________________________________

Introductory Protocol:  Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study!  I expect this interview will last around 60 minutes.  During the interview I have several topics I would like to discuss including basic information about yourself and your education and also about your experiences related to employment.  This is a semi-structured interview which means the goal is for you to talk openly and freely about your life experiences.  I will be referring to a list of prepared questions to direct the interview and it may be necessary at some points for me to interrupt you in order to get to all of the key questions.

After we talk today if you have any questions about the research you can contact me directly at 217-248-9937 or spres2@illinois.edu or Anjale Welton at ajwelton@illinois.edu.  Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEMOGRAPHIC:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| “I want to ask you some basic background questions to start off.” | 1. About how much time altogether at this and previous jobs have you been in a position which included hiring employees?  
2. What aspects of the hiring process have you experienced?  
   a. PROBES – screening applications, answering questions about the job or application process on the phone, supervising skills tests, conducting interviews |
| DISABILITY AWARENESS              | 3. Discuss how often you have interacted with interns, applicants, or employees who are blind or visually impaired and the types of interaction. |
| OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS in the JOB Seeking and hiring process | 4. What similarities or differences have you noticed specifically about the job seeking strategies used by people who are visually impaired compared to their sighted colleagues?  
5. What similarities or differences have you noticed about employment skills of people who are visually impaired compared to their sighted colleagues?  
6. Describe your experiences interacting with interns and employees who were blind or visually impaired.  
7. What if any particular skills do you perceive are strengths of the B/VI employees you have hired? |
graduated from the [site school].”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8.</th>
<th>What if any employment skills do you perceive were underdeveloped in VI applicants and employees?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>What if any perception do you have of where people learn employment skills?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>What employability skills related to job seeking do you perceive your employees gained in high school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>What valuable job seeking strategies and employment related skills do you think could be taught or learned in high school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Do you have any other information related specifically to the topic that I have not asked about?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CLOSING Script

Thank you for participating in this study. I will contact you in the future to review the written transcript of our conversation today so that you can verify the accuracy.
Semi Structured School Staff Interview Protocol

Programs Designed to Prepare Blind and Visually Impaired Secondary Students for Employment: An Embedded Case Study

Date/Time: ____________________________________________________
Interviewee (Name and Pseudo- Name): _______________________________________
Interviewer: ___________________________________________________
Post-Interview Comments/Leads/Notes:

Introductory Protocol: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! I expect this interview will last around 60 minutes. During the interview I have several topics I would like to discuss including basic information about yourself and programs at the [site school]. This is a semi-structured interview which means the goal is for you to talk openly and freely about your experiences. I will be referring to a list of prepared questions to direct the interview and it may be necessary at some points for me to interrupt you in order to get to all of the key questions.

After we talk today if you have any questions about the research you can contact me directly at 217-248-9937 or spres2@illinois.edu or Anjale Welton at ajwelton@illinois.edu. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEMOGRAPHIC:</td>
<td>“I want to ask you some basic background questions to start off.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Briefly list your educational degrees and licenses/certificates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Have you completed training specifically to prepare you to work with people who are blind or visually impaired?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Probes - If so please describe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Formal, informal, on the job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. About how long have you worked with students who are blind or visually impaired?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Probes – how long as an educational administrator?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. What kinds of leadership positions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VISION and MISSION</td>
<td>4. What is your vision about employment outcomes for students who are B/VI?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. What are your impressions about the impact of your school’s programming on the employment outcomes of graduates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS of K-12 Education PROGRAMS AND CURRICULUM</td>
<td>“Next I want to talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. What curricular programs does your school have in place to prepare students for employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Probes-separate/employability specific course, skills integrated into general/CTE courses, units, vocational specific, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Besides specific courses in the curriculum, what other programs does your school have or participate in that prepares students for employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Probes – SETE, student work program, ECC, etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**OBSERVATION AND PERCEPTION OF JOB SEEKING AND EMPLOYABILITY PREPARATION**

“In this last set of questions I would like to discuss your observation and perception of job seeking and employability preparation.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Do you partner or collaborate with other agencies to provide instruction and reinforcement of employment skills? (Probes – VR, CILs, LEAs) If so please describe these programs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What perception do you have of where people learn employment related skills?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. What employment related skills do you think could be taught or learned in high school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Discuss specific types of employability skills it is important to teach to students who are blind or visually impaired.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Probes – skills similar to non-disabled and sighted peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Skills different from peers who are sighted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. When it comes to employability and job seeking skills instruction what similarities or differences have you noticed in curriculum for students with visual impairments compared to curricula for other students?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Discuss what barriers exist to revising school curriculum if any changes are needed to better address employment preparation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. If you have had an opportunity to observe your students or graduates engaged in job seeking strategies and employment describe your observations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Probes: Have you observed any differences in the job seeking strategies used by people who are visually impaired compared to their sighted peers?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. What if any particular employment related skills do you perceive are strengths of the VI students you have observed?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. What if any employment related skills do you perceive were underdeveloped in VI students you observed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Discuss the job seeking strategies used by student job seekers in terms of what strategies were helpful or not helpful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Discuss the experiences your students and alumni have shared with you about getting a job.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Probes – data on current students or alumni, informal communications from alumni, etc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Probes – barriers, helpful skills, etc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. What are your impressions of the overall employment rate of people who are blind or visually impaired?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Do you have additional information about the topic you would like to share?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Closing Script:**

Thank you for participating in this study. I will contact you in the future to review the written transcript of our conversation today so that you can verify the accuracy.
Semi Structured Current Student Interview Protocol

*Programs Designed to Prepare Blind and Visually Impaired Secondary Students for Employment: An Embedded Case Study*

Date/Time: ______________________________________________________

Interviewee (Name and Pseudo-Name): __________________________________

Interviewer: ________________________________________________________

Post-Interview Comments/Leads/Notes:

____________________________________________________________________

Introductory Protocol: *Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! I expect this interview will last up to 60 minutes. During the interview I have several topics I would like to discuss including basic information about yourself, your education and your experiences related to employment. This is a semi-structured interview which means the goal is for you to talk openly and freely about your life experiences. I will be referring to a list of prepared questions to direct the interview and it may be necessary at some points for me to interrupt you in order to get to all of the key questions.*

After we talk today if you have any questions about the research you can contact me directly at 217-248-9937 or spres2@illinois.edu or Anjale Welton at ajwelton@illinois.edu. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEMOGRAPHIC:</td>
<td>1. What year were you born?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. What is your gender?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. How do you identify in terms of race or ethnicity?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. What city or town do you live in currently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Where do you attend school during the regular school year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I want to ask you some basic background questions to start off.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISABILITY</td>
<td>6. Please describe your eye condition(s)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. How much vision do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. At what age was your eye condition diagnosed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. About what age did your visual impairment impact your daily living?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Describe how your disability influences your daily life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Next I am going to ask some questions about your visual impairment.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td>11. How many years have you attended the [site school]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Tell me about the classes you are taking in high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. What classes are you taking or programs are you enrolled in that help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prepare you for employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. INSERT here – questions about specific courses and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOB Seeking</td>
<td>OTHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Now I would like to talk about employment.”</td>
<td>22. Do you have any other information related specifically to the topic that I have not asked about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What have you learned from these programs that prepared you for a career?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Of all of your experiences at [the site school], which ones do you feel have best prepared you for employment?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. What have you NOT learned in your K-12 education experience that would be beneficial in searching for a job and being employed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Describe any post-secondary training or education you have already received while still in high school? Probes: Trade school, Jr. College, 4-yr college, Job Club, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Discuss any job experiences you have had. [IF none, adjust wording of the following questions accordingly].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Probe: job shadowing, part time, full time, volunteer, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Tell me about all the methods you used or steps you took when you were searching for a job [can take when you search for a job], a. PROBE: What (other) specific strategies did you [can you] use such as Internet searches, attending job/career fairs, sending out resumes, walking/calling into businesses, using services of employment agencies, or other strategies? b. <em>If applicable</em>: Which of these were beneficial in the job search which led to a job offer? c. <em>If applicable</em>: Which of the strategies were not helpful?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Can you describe the stages or phases involved in becoming employed? (examples: Career planning, Goal setting, searching independently or with support from others, setting timelines or deadlines, interview, begin working, learning the job, retaining the job)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Describe the role of other people during your job search. (probe – parents or family/friends/rehab counselor/teacher/anyone else?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. What influence if any does your visual disability have in employment?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLOSING Script</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you for participating in this study. I will contact you in the future to review the written transcript of our conversation today so that you can verify the accuracy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

139
Semi Structured Graduate Interview Protocol

*Programs Designed to Prepare Blind and Visually Impaired Secondary Students for Employment: An Embedded Case Study*

Date/Time: ____________________________________________________

Interviewee (Name and Pseudo-Name):__________________________________

Interviewer: ________________________________________________________

Post-Interview Comments/Leads/Notes: ______________________________

Introductory Protocol: *Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! I expect this interview will last around 60 minutes. During the interview I have several topics I would like to discuss including basic information about yourself, your education, and your experiences related to employment. This is a semi-structured interview which means the goal is for you to talk openly and freely about your life experiences. I will be referring to a list of prepared questions to direct the interview and it may be necessary at some points for me to interrupt you in order to get to all of the key questions.*

After we talk today if you have any questions about the research you can contact me directly at 217-248-9937 or spres2@illinois.edu or Anjale Welton at ajwelton@illinois.edu. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. What is your gender?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. How do you identify in terms of race or ethnicity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. What city or town do you live in currently? __________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Who do you live with?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. What is your relationship status?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Married or partner – Widowed – Separated – Divorced - Never been married or in a partnership - other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Do you have any dependents and if so how many?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Yes. How many?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISABILITY</td>
<td>8. Please describe your eye condition(s)? ______________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. How much vision do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. At what age was your eye condition diagnosed? ________________________</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11. About what age did your visual impairment impact your daily living?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Describe how your disability influences your daily life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td>13. How many years did you attend [this school]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Tell me about the classes you took in high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. What classes did you take or programs were you enrolled in that helped prepare you for employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>questions about your educational experiences.</strong></td>
<td>b. INSERT here – questions about specific courses and programs offered at the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. What did you learn from these programs that prepared you for a career?</td>
<td>16. Of all of your experiences at, [the site school] which ones do you feel best prepared you for employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. What did you NOT learn in your K-12 education experience that would be beneficial in searching for a job and being employed?</td>
<td>18. Describe any post-secondary training or education you received either after or while still in high school? Probes: Trade school, Jr. College, 4-yr college, Job Club, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **JOB Seeking** | 19. Discuss any job experiences you have had. [IF none, adjust wording of the following questions accordingly]. |
| “Now I would like to hear about your job search experience.” | a. Probe: job shadowing, part time, full time, volunteer, etc. |
| 20. Tell me about all the methods you used or steps you took when you were searching for a job [can take when you search for a job]. | a. PROBE: What (other) specific strategies did you use such as Internet searches, attending job/career fairs, sending out resumes, walking/calling into businesses, using services of employment agencies, or other strategies? |
| 21. Let’s talk about each of the methods and strategies you used when you were looking for a job. | a. Which of these were beneficial in the job search which led to a job offer? |
| 22. Can you describe the stages or phases involved in becoming employed? (examples: Career planning, Goal setting, searching independently or with support from others, setting timelines or deadlines, interview, begin working, learning the job, retaining the job) | b. Which of the strategies were not helpful? |
| 23. Describe the role of other people during your job search. (probe – parents or family/friends/rehab counselor/teacher/anyone else?) | 24. What influence if any does your visual disability have in your job search? |

| **PERCEPTION OF JOB SEEKING AND EMPLOYABILITY PREPARATION** | 25. What else can you tell me about what helped you to be prepared for your job search and for employment? |
| **CLOSING Script** | 26. Describe the type of setting and training that would be beneficial for teachers to provide in order to prepare their students for employment. |
| 27. Do you have any other information related specifically to the topic that I have not asked about? | |

Thank you for participating in this study. I will contact you in the future to review the written transcript of our conversation today so that you can verify the accuracy.
# Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval

## Notice of Approval: Amendment #2

**November 14, 2018**

**Principal Investigator**  
Anjale Welton

**CC**  
Serena Preston

**Protocol Title**  
Programs Designed to Prepare Blind and Visually Impaired Secondary Students for Employment: An Embedded Case Study

**Protocol Number**  
16565

**Funding Source**  
Unfunded

**Review Type**  
Expedited 6, 7

**Approved Subparts**  
D

**Amendment Requested**  
Changing the protocol title

**Status**  
Active

**Risk Determination**  
No more than minimal risk

**Approval Date**  
November 14, 2018

**Expiration Date**  
April 11, 2020

This letter authorizes the use of human subjects in the above protocol. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved the research study as described.

The Principal Investigator of this study is responsible for:
- Conducting research in a manner consistent with the requirements of the University and federal regulations found at 45 CFR 46.
- Requesting approval from the IRB prior to implementing modifications.
- Notifying OPRS of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated events, participant complaints, or protocol deviations.
- Notifying OPRS of the completion of the study.