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PERSPECTIVES ON THE USEFULNESS OF A LITERACY-BASED
SOCIAL SKILL STRATEGY**

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STAFF DEVELOPMENT FOR DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS:
PERSPECTIVES ON THE USEFULNESS OF A LITERACY-BASED SOCIAL SKILL
STRATEGY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

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ABSTRACT

STAFF DEVELOPMENT FOR DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS: PERSPECTIVES ON THE USEFULNESS OF A LITERACY-BASED SOCIAL SKILL STRATEGY

Pattiann LaVeglia

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to discover Direct Support Professionals' (DSPs) perceptions of a staff development session for creating a literacy-based social skills strategy known as social stories or story-based instruction. The participants in this study were six DSPs employed by a non-profit agency in the Mid-Hudson Region of New York State which provides community-based residential services to children and adults with autism and other developmental disabilities. Three data collection methods were used in this study: a questionnaire, written reflections, and two in-depth interviews. This study was guided by four research questions exploring the perceived self-efficacy of DSPs, their perceptions of how the staff development session influenced their skills as teaching professionals, and the impact of the social story strategy on the adult learners they support. Interview data were collected and analyzed using the steps from Giorgi's (1997) descriptive phenomenological method. The findings indicated a consensus among participants that the literacy-based social skill strategy was highly beneficial for teaching COVID-19 mitigation skills. Findings also indicated that DSPs perceived that the usefulness of the literacy-based social skill strategy would be dependent on a person centered instructional approach. Additional findings indicated that participants perceived their lack of professional development opportunities as a direct

obstacle to their growth as teaching professionals which they further believed could influence the quality of life of the individuals they support.

The implications of this study indicate that DSPs would benefit greatly from staff development that employs evidenced based strategies with a person centered approach in a collaborative learning environment.

Keywords: Direct Support Professional, staff development, social story, social skills, autism, developmental disabilities, COVID 19

DEDICATION

It is with enduring gratitude and admiration that I dedicate this dissertation to those who have inspired me so often and so profoundly. Ruth, the strength in the meaning of your name pales in comparison to the strength of your spirit. You have supported me along this journey in so many ways. You have gracefully listened to me, shared your insights, and responded to my many “can you tell me if this makes sense?” questions. Thank you for teaching me to *Stand Up Eight*.

To my first teachers, my parents Ann Marie and Patrick LaVeglia; through her faith in God, my mother instilled in me the confidence that there wasn’t anything I couldn’t do once I set my mind to it. She also taught me to dream, to not simply hope for a better tomorrow but to make tomorrow better. My father taught me so many truths, the value of a curious mind, a resiliency to navigate obstacles, and above all else the perseverance to never give up. So much of who I am today is because of the love, commitment, and sacrifices my parents have given and made for me.

This dissertation is also dedicated to all those who teach, inspire, and advance the efforts to increase educational equity for those living with autism and other developmental disabilities, especially Direct Support Professionals.

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I would like to express my sincerest gratitude and admiration for those champions in my life who, at every turn found ways to encourage and support my aspirations and endeavors. First, my mentor, Dr. Brett Elizabeth Blake who provided me with her invaluable insights and steadfast affirmations throughout the entire process of my dissertation. Her guidance, support, and refreshing sense of candor kept me on track while teaching me to challenge my thinking and the thinking of those around me. I am forever grateful....no white flag!

I thank my committee member, Dr. Maria Mello who so generously offered her time and her expertise in research involving students with autism and other intellectual disabilities. Her guidance enhanced my understanding of evidenced based practices and lines of research involving students with disabilities which I plan to explore further.

To my St. John's University professors, and my colleagues in the St. John's University PhD program, you have inspired me with the examples of excellence you set for yourselves and the steadfast commitment you demonstrate to ensure social justice, and equity for marginalized populations. Your determination to hold true to these principles and succeed amidst the greatest health and economic crisis to affect our country in a century has been a marvel to witness and I have learned so much from all of you.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Leung (2009) noted in his exploration of the link between literacy and quality of life indicators, that individuals who rated their life quality higher, tended to be those who were literate in critical and socially structured skills. There are many elements that contribute to the concepts of a quality driven life for persons living with developmental disabilities and in particular, those with autism spectrum disorders. Schalock and Verdugo (2002) identified eight domains and five factors that were considered to be predictors of quality of life of persons with intellectual disabilities. Self-determination, personal development, social participation, and independence were among those areas listed by the 1,264 adults sampled in their study. It can be said that quality of life may have less to do with a presence of an intellectual disability and more to do with opportunities that improve individuals' participation in their communities (Wilson et al., 2017). Thus, the supports for persons with intellectual disabilities have a crucial influence on their quality of life (Thompson et al., 2009).

Students who receive special educational services in district schools or residential schools will transition to their own community settings, seek meaningful employment opportunities, or transition to residential placements once they graduate from or age out of school-based programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Supports and strategies that focus on building communication skills, language development or addressing needs regarding literacy instruction for these learners are often identified during transition planning and form the learners' postsecondary goals (Bledsoe et al., 2003; Lasater & Brady, 1995; Lee et al., 2007). Common Core State Standards (CCSS) which emphasize

speaking and listening skills, require educators to consider the needs of students with autism spectrum disorders when planning instruction and selecting teaching strategies. The implementation of instructional strategies to target the identified needs of learners, rests solely in the hands of the skilled practitioner and the role of the teacher becomes a critical component in matching instructional needs with what they believe will be the best method to attain the targeted outcomes (Borko & Shavelson, 1990). Decisions for choosing one teaching strategy over another are influenced not only by the needs of the learner but can be impacted by a teacher's self-efficacy and experiences with professional development (Mahler et. al., 2017). Educational plans that are appropriately designed for young adults transitioning from school to adult residential programs require not only knowing what to teach but also an understanding of where and how skills will be taught in order to help students achieve such goals (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009).

Adult learners with autism or other developmental disabilities, who move to community-based residential programs after aging out of school settings will receive person centered supports and services detailed not in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or transition plan, but in a Life Plan. In New York State's Office for Persons with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), the Life Plan is designed to identify the services allowable for billing Medicaid in accordance with the Home and Community-based Services (HCBS) Waiver for persons with developmental disabilities. In community-based residential settings the HCBS waiver services are provided by Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) and include teaching skills in the areas of self-advocacy, functional academics, socialization, employment readiness, community integration, activities of daily living, financial management, and communication (14 CRR-NY 635-10.0). The

design of community-based residential services for adults with developmental disabilities in New York State emphasizes that the Direct Support Professional be skilled in understanding and implementing strategies for teaching both individuals and groups of learners who often present a wide range of skill levels and abilities (Johnson, 2019).

Self-determination for individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities is a foundational characteristic found in the charters and mission statements of New York State funded agencies that provide direct and governing oversight of residential and community-based programs for these adult learners (OPWDD, 2020). Designed with this goal in mind, agencies governed by OPWDD employ over 110,000 DSPs in New York State (OPWDD, 2020). The DSP workforce has been experiencing a high turnover rate for decades and as such, research has shown that the impact it has had on the quality of life of individuals receiving services in community-based programs has not been favorable (Freidman, 2018). Contributing to the high turnover rates for DSPs are the historically low wages of the profession, few qualifications, a lack of training, and limited career growth opportunities (Hasan, 2013; Hewitt & Larson, 2007). The focus of this study was to explore Direct Support Professionals' perceptions of a professional development series for teaching a literacy-based social skill strategy to adults with autism and other intellectual disabilities at community-based residential programs.

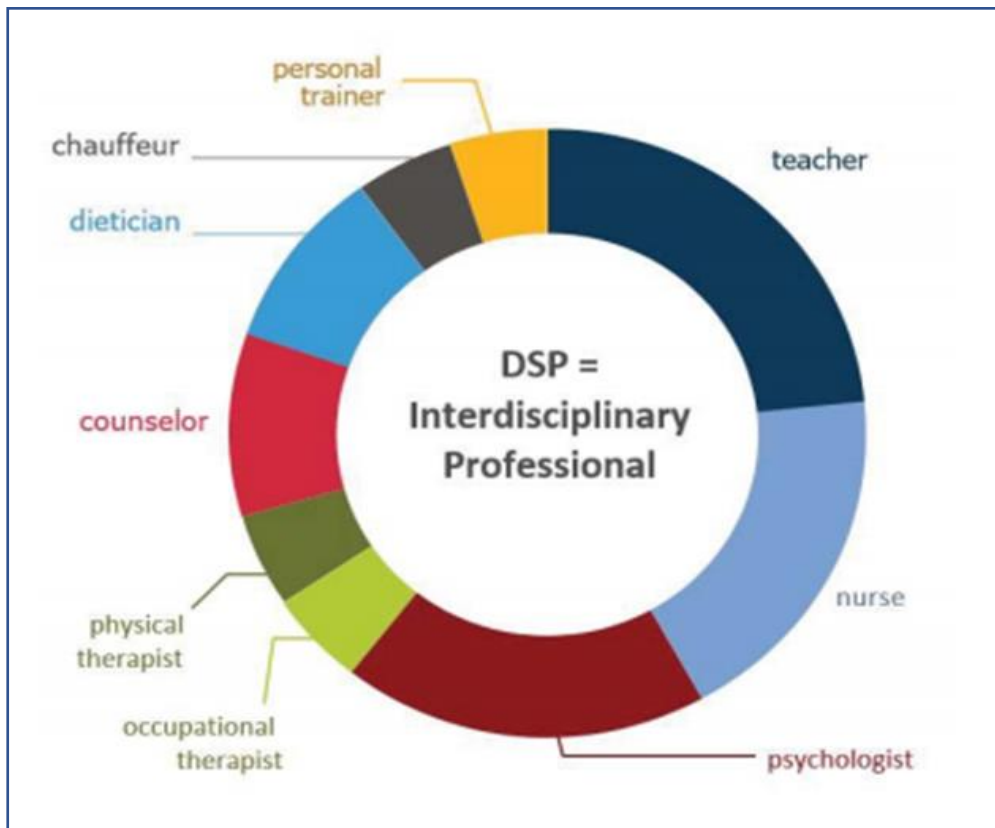
Background of the Problem

Direct Support Professionals in New York State are responsible to teach the many socially appropriate and therapeutic learning skills identified by adults with autism and other developmental disabilities who desire to fully manifest their self-determination, employment goals, and quality of life interests (Higgins et al., 2008). Formal educational

preparation and traditional learning environments such as a classroom, rarely exist between Direct Support Professionals and the adults they are facilitating learning opportunities for (Larson & Hewitt, 2005). DSPs provide instruction in real world settings, whether it is in the community, or in the adult learner's home. These supports and services are multidimensional and related to areas such as health and wellness, personal care, counseling, transportation, and lifelong learning. Taken as a whole, the profession of direct support worker draws on nine distinct professional disciplines (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1

DSP Scope of Practice (Hewitt, 2017)



This graphic represents the time DSPs spend practicing a variety of disciplines to meet the needs of people with disabilities. Source: Hewitt, 2017

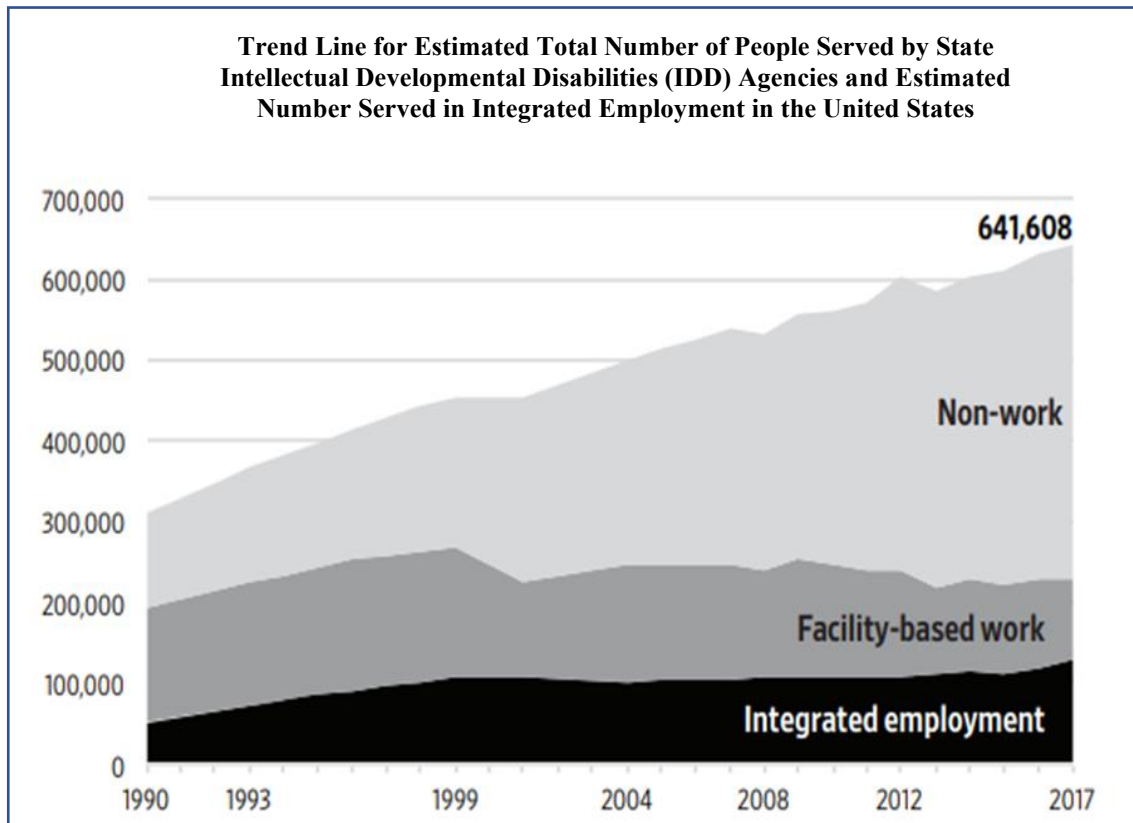
Larger than any of the interdisciplinary roles reflected in the work of a DSP is that of a teacher. Within this discipline, there is a familiarity between the roles of DSPs and paraprofessionals who apply principles of task analysis, systems of least prompts, behavior support, modeling, and strategies to scaffold learners' abilities to acquire a wealth of adaptive living and functional academic skills. Recognizing this emphasis on teaching has been one factor which has resulted in a transformation of the DSP workforce (PCPID, 2017). In the past, DSPs were considered to be caregivers, however in the 1990's as efforts to promote fuller community inclusion and competitive employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities were enacted, the mindset of service delivery in general shifted from custodial care to person centered supports (PCMR, 1996).

Although there have been numerous state and federal initiatives, as well as policy changes over the past 30 years, increases in competitive employment for people with intellectual disabilities has not occurred nationally as once estimated (see Figure 1.2). Together the categories of non-work and facility-based work represent the vast majority of individuals with intellectual disabilities who are not engaged in paid, integrated employment opportunities nationwide (Winsor et. al., 2018).

When looking at the same categories for people with intellectual disabilities living in New York State it translates to over 55,700 people or 89% of persons receiving support that are not engaged in competitive, or integrated employment. "Transitions-age youth and young adults continue to face challenges in preparing for and acquiring competitive employment with one obstacle being insufficient professional development for staff" (Winsor, et. al., 2018, p. 8).

Figure 1.2

Employment Services and Outcomes Trends



Source: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes Through 2017

Since March 2017 DSPs have been required by the NYS Office For People With Developmental Disabilities to adhere to the NYS DSP Core Competencies (NYS ADM#2014-03). Developed through extensive research and nationally validated through an external process, these competency areas closely align with the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Home and Community-based Services Setting Rule (2014). They identify a common set of core competencies across community-based Long-Term Supports and Service (LTSS) for the purpose of informing direct support service delivery and promoting best practices in community-based residential settings (NADSP, 2016). In an effort to build capacity for DSPs, who serve as job-coaches, adult

services staff, and community workers, staff development efforts aimed at best practices in teaching social skills is key to providing quality services for people with disabilities seeking meaning employment (NADSP, 2011).

Current research suggests that DSPs need and want more specific training beyond annual, regulatory trainings that address health and safety in the workplace (Johnson, 2019). DSPs face many challenges in integrating areas of instructional focus that are meaningful to the adult learner with disabilities, address the goals outlined in the person's Life Plan, and serve as a measure of effective teaching which is rooted in the DSP Core Competencies. To date, no qualitative study has provided information regarding DSPs' perceptions of the staff development they receive to build their core competencies or to support the academic, employment, or life enriching goals of the learners they support through individual and group instruction.

Statement of the Problem

Young adults with disabilities will have years of opportunities and learning ahead of them. They will look to professional support staff to guide, teach, and encourage their self-advocacy and self-determination endeavors. Research has illustrated that self-determination is positively correlated to perceived quality of life for transition age youth with disabilities (Biggs & Carter, 2017), and has provided a glimpse into the positive consequences resulting from the professional relationships between DSPs and the people they support. As more students living with autism prepare to graduate and seek employment opportunities in their communities, they will require not only job readiness skills but tools to navigate the challenging landscape of communication in the workplace.

Social skill instruction provides the learner with a method to problem solve the complexities of social interactions across a wide variety of possible situations (Kalyva & Agliotis, 2009). Developing competencies in social dynamics unlocks avenues for self-determination to flourish and promotes quality of life (QOL) indicators (Biggs & Carter, 2017). To that end, community-based agencies are entrusted with creating staff development courses for Direct Support Professionals to effectively implement social skill strategies and instructional plans that will promote the QOL for the people they support (OPWDD, 2020). Many teachers have used literacy-based strategies shown to promote social skills for students with autism and other developmental disabilities within the school setting and research has provided a great deal of information on the use of social stories and social narratives (Karal & Wolfe, 2018). However, little is known about the use of social stories with adult learners with autism or other developmental disabilities in community-based residential settings. Furthermore, what is largely absent in the current research is evidence of the perceptions, beliefs, or input of the support professional regarding the staff development they receive to develop their teaching skills and contribute to meaningful learning outcomes for the growing population of adults with autism and other developmental disabilities who have transitioned from school settings to adult community-based programs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to discover Direct Support Professionals' perceptions of their lived experience with a staff development session designed for creating a literacy-based social skills strategy known as social stories or story-based instruction. This study explored the perceived self-efficacy of DSPs to

utilize social stories as a teaching tool, to understand their perceptions regarding how the staff development session influences their skills as teaching professionals, and to what extent the DSPs perceived the impact of the social story strategy to be on adult learners with autism and other developmental disabilities.

Research Questions

This study was guided by four research questions:

1. What do DSPs perceive about the experience of the staff development training for creating social stories?
2. What do DSPs perceive the impact of the experience of a staff development training for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy to be as it relates to their teaching skills?
3. How does the experience of the staff development training for creating social stories impact the DSP's perceived ability to meet the requirements of the New York State Core Competencies for Direct Support Professionals?
4. What do DSPs perceive the impact of the staff development training for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy to be on the quality of life for the adult learners with autism or other developmental disabilities that they support?

Significance of the Study

Since March 2017 DSPs have been required by the NYS Office For People With Developmental Disabilities to adhere to the NYS DSP Core Competencies (NYS ADM#2014-03). To date, no qualitative study has provided information regarding DSPs'

perceptions of the staff development they receive to build their core competencies which includes individual and group instruction. This study aimed to provide DSPs with a voice which can inform the design of future staff development training utilizing an evidence-based social skill strategy known as Social Stories™. Results from this study have the potential to inform policymakers and stakeholders who provide services for adults with autism both statewide and nationally. The quality and effectiveness of long term supports for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities depend upon qualified teaching professionals who continuously receive research-based professional development. In New York State there is a critical shortage of candidates for direct support work, and nationally, the average annual turnover for DSP positions is an estimated 45 percent, with a range of 18–76 percent (Hiersteiner, 2016). The financial cost of continual recruitment is high. More critical is the cost to individuals with disabilities who experience a revolving door of DSPs, resulting in the loss of continuity in their learning and skill development. Turnover rates have been linked not only to low wages and increasing demands of a workforce that has been experiencing a nationwide staffing shortage for decades but also to the lack of professional development needs for DSPs to experience success and enhance their self-efficacy within their dynamic roles (Espinoza, 2017).

This study provided insights into the Direct Support Professionals' perceptions and beliefs about their roles and skill levels within their profession. Understanding the perceptions and lived experience of DSPs involved in this study provided insights which can inform the design and implementation of future staff development sessions. Providing DSPs with opportunities to experience professional development and more

autonomy over their learning may also lead to increased motivation and enhanced teaching skills.

Given that the staff development experience incorporated guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) during the COVID-19 pandemic, skill acquisition for participants benefitted them in the knowledge to limit, and or mitigate the spread of the coronavirus thereby contributing to the protection of the health and safety of the individual person and the potential health and safety of those persons in society they may come in contact with.

Positionality

The nature of qualitative research places the researcher in all aspects of the study. The researcher cannot be separated from their roles of investigator, data collection tool, or data analyst. “There’s no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all” (Hall, 1990, p.18). Who the researcher is, or their positionality, in the context of their identity, views, roles, and experiences will inherently be woven into the research (Creswell, 2007). Since study design, data collection, and analysis are to an extent a product of the researcher’s positionality, it is crucial to research that a researcher makes the influences on subjectivity as apparent as possible (Creswell & Creswell, 2014).

As the researcher/practitioner for this study my roles are also intertwined with those of an educator and administrator. The topic of staff development for Direct Support Professionals is a topic that I am passionate about. Stemming from my first experiences as a DSP many years ago I recognized how important ongoing professional development was to fulfilling my responsibilities of empowering and teaching the adults I

supported. That thirst for knowledge set me on a course to complete my graduate studies and to become a special/regular education teacher. As a scholar-practitioner, I have seen firsthand how valuable early intervention efforts are for children in school settings who are guided by teachers and paraprofessionals. Efforts to develop literacy skills, social skills and strategies aimed at promoting person centered goals for children with autism and other developmental disabilities were informed through ongoing professional development and best practices. Equipped with over 15 years of experience in the classroom setting I revisited the field of residential settings for adults living with autism and other intellectual disabilities. As a senior administrator and director of staff development I am responsible for curriculum development and implementation. I am keenly aware of and sensitive to the challenges involved in the continuation of those efforts for young adults who transition out of school settings and into community-based residential settings. I oversee initial and annual training, provide workshops, and design professional development initiatives for DSPs on a regular basis for non-profit agencies as well as the New York Alliance for Inclusion & Innovation. I consider myself a knowledgeable educator on the topic of supporting children and adults living with autism spectrum disorders and other intellectual disabilities. Since the design, data collection, and analysis were to some extent a product of my positionality, it was vital that I engaged in reflexive practices to make the influences on subjectivity as apparent as possible.

Definition of Terms

Age out—the age at which a student may no longer receive special education services. Section 4402(5) of NYS Education Law indicates that students with disabilities reaching the age of 21 by August 31st are no longer eligible for special education services

Direct Support Professional (DSP) -- according to the NYS OPWDD Regional Centers for Workforce Transformation (2017) is someone that works to assist people with intellectual or developmental disabilities to advance their skills and realize their full potential.

DSP Core Competencies-- The Core Competencies adopted by the NYS Talent Development Consortium apply to all Direct Support Professional across the state, working at state-operated and voluntary programs. Coupled with the Code of Ethics for Direct Support Professionals, these values-based competencies and skills are the foundation of person-centered supports for New Yorkers with developmental disabilities. The competencies are broken down into seven goal areas covering all aspects of the individual's life, while also including the professionalism of direct support.

- Putting People First
- Building and Maintaining Positive Relationships
- Demonstrating Professionalism
- Supporting Good Health
- Supporting Safety
- Having a Home
- Being Active and Productive in Society

Within each goal, there are competency areas that are defined by specific skills that can be demonstrated by a DSP in their work.

HCBS -- Home and community-based services (HCBS) provide opportunities for Medicaid beneficiaries to receive services in their own home or community rather than institutions or other isolated settings. These programs serve a variety of targeted

populations groups, such as people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, and/or mental illnesses.

IEP -- Individual Education Plan -- Individualized Education Plan/Program is a written document that's developed for each public-school child who is eligible for special education. The IEP is created through a team effort and reviewed at least once a year that the child is eligible for special education.

Life Plan -- The Life Plan development is driven by the person, with input and participation of all members of the care-planning team. The ultimate outcome of a comprehensive person-centered service plan is that it meets the needs, overarching safeguards and life goals of the person.

The Life Plan is a document that outlines a person's:

- Goals and desired outcomes
- Habilitation goals
- Strengths and preferences
- Clinical and support needs (paid and unpaid) identified through their assessment
- Services and provider
- Safeguards including individual back-up plans and strategies

This document changes as the needs of the person change.

Staff Development Session -- is defined as the training sessions DSPs will receive in order to conduct individual and group social skills lessons utilizing a literacy-based *Social Stories*™ intervention for adults with autism and other intellectual disabilities.

Social Stories™ refers to the concept developed by Carol Gray in 1991 based on her work as a teacher of students with autism. The goal of story-based instruction is to

promote positive social interactions and provide a model for demonstrating successful skills.

Transition Plan -- A transition plan is the section of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) that outlines transition goals and services for the student. Transition planning is used to identify and develop goals which need to be accomplished during the current school year to assist the student in meeting their post-high school goals. New York State law requires that a transition plan be developed before the student turns 15 years of age.

OPWDD is The New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) and is responsible for coordinating services for nearly 140,000 New Yorkers with developmental disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and other developmental disabilities.

RCWT-- The Regional Centers for Workforce Transformation were created in 2013 to strengthen the professionalism of DSPs who support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The RCWT mission is to develop the capacity of the DSPs by educating them on nationally validated ethical standards, offering resources that help develop professional skill sets, and improving their overall competencies.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Comprehension Skills and Autism

Characteristics of students with autism are varied as the term spectrum would indicate; however, current understandings on autism include its association with difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors of interest. Autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors, which are described in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Repetitive behaviors and fixations on letters or numbers, for example, and research which suggests that hyperlexia is found more frequently in children with autism than other developmental disorders is a consideration to focus less on the direct instruction of decoding and shifting attention to increasing efforts that target instruction in comprehension. From their study, Johnels et al. (2017) found that strength in word decoding within the context of poor comprehension was identified in students with autism spectrum disorders. Research suggests that excessive decoding may be present in students with autism. Reading instruction relies on teaching decoding and comprehensions skills

The array of criteria that contributed to a diagnosis of autism in the subjects identified by researchers across this review varied and it consisted of no single form of measurement. In this review the range of oral language skills, IQ and other factors will be indicated to refine the reader's perspectives on the topography of the research reviewed. A significant amount of the research involving students with autism reveals a dominant use of the single subject experimental design. For purposes of this review the design elements related to the instructional strategies employed in those studies along

with the identified literacy strengths and weaknesses of the subjects will be analyzed for parallel trends and further examined in the context of the research focus.

Comprehension involves an active process to acquire meaning from text, read or spoken, and one that requires focus and attention at a higher level. Stanovich (1980) indicated that good readers can decode words with ease, that is they have sufficient and automatic word recognition skills, thereby allowing for a reserve of cognitive energies that can be deployed for comprehension and meaning making. Understanding how letters are used to encode speech sounds in written language is crucial in learning to decode unfamiliar words. Strengths in decoding are needed ingredients for constructing meaning and building comprehension skills.

Motivational factors to help struggling readers engage more in the very task that they find difficult has been a topic of many research studies. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) found that allowing students to make choices about their reading material increased the likelihood that they would engage more in reading. Furthermore, they suggested that an increased effort and commitment to reading was demonstrated by students who were given a genuine choice in selecting text genres. Providing choices for students to select books and text from genres that interest them can lead to increasing their motivation and creating the setting conditions for instructional strategies to take root. Both decoding skills and motivation through choice in text selection are factors that assist students in the direct and indirect process of reading development.

As we continue to explore areas that may uncover how students with autism spectrum disorders develop reading skills we should recognize that the literature has few large-scale studies that examine the reading abilities of students specifically diagnosed

with autism. One of the larger sample populations used was in the Nation et al. (2006) study that sampled 41 children from age six to 15 years of age. Four categories of assessments were administered in the areas of reading accuracy, reading comprehension, oral language skills, and nonverbal ability. Strengths in decoding that would otherwise indicate strengths in comprehension do not appear to be consistent in students with autism. Nation et al. (2006) found that of the 20 children who achieved normal range word reading skills, 10 showed poor reading comprehension. These findings lend to research that suggests hyperlexia may be a characteristic associated with autism spectrum disorders. A confounding factor should be noted that the students in this study also demonstrated a significant weakness in the decoding of non-words. This may indicate that the strength in decoding skills are attributed to factors other than phonological awareness and suggest an element of fixation on letters or memorization of familiar words.

Adapting Strategies

Much of the work of the early 2000's continued to show that students with autism spectrum disorders may develop decoding skills necessary to read but struggle to construct meaning from text. As research findings during that time shed light on similarities and characteristics related to a person diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, such as challenges in social interaction, research in literacy noted these traits when discussing findings of studies that focused on measuring the effectiveness of comprehension strategies. Of the literature reviewed involving students with autism, an increase in research is noted since the publishing of national legislation and research findings such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the National Reading Panel

(2001). These post NCLB (2001) and NRP (2001) studies have targeted adapted instructional strategies aimed at increasing comprehension skills. Whalon and Hart (2011) employed a qualitative research design focused on applying a proven comprehension strategy recommended by NRP known as the Question-and-Answer Relationship strategy. Their sample of three children ages five to 10 years old who had a diagnosis of autism, indicated that in adapting a proven strategy to address literacy communication skills and providing students with an opportunity to interact with their general education peers during reading instruction, both comprehension strategies and social communication goals could be improved.

Based on the premise asserted by Nation et al. (2006) that students with autism rely heavily on memorization to learn sight words without necessarily developing comprehension or phonological awareness, Mucchetti (2013) conducted research that focused on increasing engagement and comprehension skills by utilizing adapted shared reading instruction. Modified books were utilized for the sample of four students ages six to eight years old who were considered minimally verbal, had an IQ below 55, and had a diagnosis of autism. Visual supports, three dimensional objects and simplified texts were utilized. The simplified texts were chosen for their concrete storyline, familiarity to urban elementary students, limited use of abstract concepts and simple realistic illustrations. The selections of the shared story materials were not based on student choice but focused on informational concepts.

By using a familiar narrative or text with limited abstract concepts, literacy research factored known characteristics about students with autism into research designs. Cihak (2006) conducted an experimental, single subject design focused on three students,

ages seven to nine who received one to one instruction, were diagnosed with autism by age two and had a history of ineffective verbal skills training. The picture comprehension system utilized in Cihak (2006) included photos of people, objects, actions, and sequence which were familiar to the students. All three subjects increased their visual comprehension to 100% up to nine weeks post intervention. The use of photo prompts is not novel; however, two distinctions should be noted involving the Cihak (2006) study. Firstly, there had not been a previous systematic approach to teaching picture reading and secondly, the use of familiar objects and people in comparison to cartoon like characters reinforces the concepts that concrete, realistic, non-abstract text may be a preferred genre for students with autism.

Motivation and Interest

Reading instruction that did not support comprehension skills in classrooms for students with autism was a noted observation in both Whalon and Hart (2011), and Williamson, et al. (2015). They recognized the difficulty that narrative text may present for students with autism as they attempted to develop reading comprehension skills. Narrative text complexities including abstract reasoning demands, can impede comprehension for the student with autism. Williamson et al. (2015) studied three students, aged 16 to 17 years old who were diagnosed with autism and were considered high functioning by their teachers. The multiple baseline design utilized instructional strategies that offered character maps, scaffolding, and listening to text while reading along. Interpretations of their findings support the idea that the obstacles presented in narrative text for the student with autism can be mitigated by using texts that students find engaging and motivational. The researchers used a popular science fiction novel that

had become a blockbuster movie. Subjects of the study however did not select the text, rather the educator thought the book had importance to students' social interactions. A similar study that did not involve students with autism consisted of four subjects in total, aged 12 to 14 years old, with only one reported IQ score of 42 (Mims et al., 2012). Subjects were diagnosed with moderate and severe developmental disabilities. The reason for its inclusion in this review is that the research methods were consistent with previous studies and indicated a pattern for how researchers selected text genres in their studies. Biographies were used for the read aloud that incorporated systematic prompting to increase comprehension skills. The biographies were not selected based on the interests of the subjects in the study, rather they were chosen by teachers who indicated that non-disabled peers were likely to read these selected texts and therefore they inferred that these texts should be sufficiently motivating to the sample students.

To greatly enhance motivation and engagement in reading while utilizing the choice or perseverating interests of the subjects in text selection Zein et al. (2016) conducted a single subject, pilot study in which the perseverative interest of a child with autism was embedded in a text. Modification of age level texts involved replacing key aspects with the sample subject's preferred object, cars. Percentages of correct responses on reading comprehension questions were analyzed during sessions when the text included the student's preferred object and when the texts did not. The results indicated that the inclusion of the student's perseverating interest may have resulted in higher comprehension levels.

In reviewing the literature involving factors that increase comprehension skills for students with autism, it is evident that research is incorporating instructional designs that

factor both the widely held characteristics associated with the behavioral, cognitive, and social traits of autism spectrum disorders and how they manifest differently across individual learners coupled with employing evidenced based instructional strategies known to increase reading comprehension skills. Selection of text that occurs from interest inventories generated by the subject has not been evident in this review.

Although researchers have included both narrative, visual, and inferred high interest texts, little has been done to increase engagement and motivation by offering preferred choice in text selection for reading comprehension instruction among students with autism.

What The Research Says About Social Stories

The term *social story* relates to a written text, often with photos and visual prompts, that guide the reader through a series of steps and appropriate responses towards a positive outcome within the context of the story. Social Stories™ refers to the concept developed by Carol Gray in 1991 based on her work as a teacher of students with autism. The goal of story-based instruction is to promote positive social interactions and provide a model for demonstrating successful skills. The National Autism Center at the May Institute's Center for the Promotion of Evidence-based Practice is a "non-profit organization that is dedicated to disseminating evidence-based information about the treatment of autism spectrum disorders, promoting best practices, and offering comprehensive and reliable resources for families, practitioners and communities" (NAC, 2015). In 2009 the National Autism Center (NAC) released its National Standards Project (NSP) Phase I report that was the result of a comprehensive analysis of the interventions available for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder. The NSP was

aimed at addressing the need for evidenced based practice guidelines to support educational and behavioral interventions that target the core characteristics of autism. Over 7,000 studies ranging from years published between 1957 and 2000 were identified, although the number of studies dropped to 775 after criterion for inclusion was applied.

The NSP developed a strength of evidence classification system consisting of three categories: *Unestablished*, indicating that little or no evidence was present to draw firm conclusions about intervention effectiveness, *Emerging*, indicating that additional high-quality studies must consistently show favorable outcomes to draw firm conclusions, and *Established*, indicating that there was enough evidence to determine that an intervention produces favorable outcomes. The NSP determined that there were eleven *Established* treatments one of which was the use of story-based interventions.

In 2015, the National Autism Center released their National Standards Project Phase 2 report which updated information on intervention effectiveness and reviewed studies between 2007 and 2012. Included in the Phase 2 report were the results of studies reviewed from 1987 to 2012 for adults 22 years and older who were living with autism spectrum disorders. According to NAC, “story-based interventions are often used with individuals who have acquired reading and comprehension skills but may also be used with individuals with strong listening comprehension skills” (p. 69). Having undergone a comprehensive rigorous review, the literacy-based intervention known as story-based social skills instruction can be considered to produce favorable outcomes for learners with autism.

The findings of Social Story™ research have also been critically reviewed for methodological fidelity. Social Story™ research that utilized single subject

methodologies involving children and adolescents with ASD in 41 studies was reviewed and found that only 7.3% of the 41 studies used proper single subject designs (Leaf et al., 2015). The studies the researchers reviewed found that there was not a strict adherence to establishing baseline stability prior to the start of interventions and that social stories were also combined with other strategies that left it difficult to impossible to establish the efficacy that social stories alone could result in the behavioral change of the student participants. Leaf et al. (2012) also noted in their comparison of the teaching interaction procedure and Social Story™ instruction for six children and adolescents with autism, that the Social Story™ intervention resulted in mastery of only four of the 18 social skills taught to participants as opposed to the teaching interaction procedure which resulted in mastery of all 18 skills across all participants. The researchers suggested that a possible factor contributing to the effectiveness of the teaching interaction procedure was its use of role playing the correct social skill. They chose not to include role playing in the Social Story™ intervention despite the recommended use of the rehearsal technique (Gray & Garand, 1993) due to the rarity of its inclusion in the literature on social stories. Furthermore, the use of modeling as a key component in the delivery of a Social Story™ session (Gray, 2020) was incorporated into the teaching interaction procedure but not in the Social Story™ procedure thereby centering the Social Story™ intervention upon correctly answering reading and listening comprehension questions (Leaf, et al., 2012).

Brady, et. al. (2016) questioned whether a literacy-based behavioral intervention that was administered by peers to young adults with autism would promote daily living skills. The researchers chose participants and peers who were similar in terms of reading level, showed an interest to participate, followed the requests of teachers on a consistent

basis, and whose academic work was up to date. The methods of the intervention consisted of a text and photo-based story that illustrated steps for making a sandwich. Peers took an active role in reading the story to the subjects from start to finish and then requesting the student to complete the task while they (peers) stayed close by and offered prompting and reinforcement. Criteria for task completion was measured at a 93% accuracy level before the peer teaching with the literacy-based story could be removed. Participants varied in the number of sessions they needed to reach the minimum criteria. Of the four participants in this study the average number of peer sessions needed to reach criteria was nine. The participants were observed in follow up sessions several times ranging from 27 to 30 days after peer instruction. At baseline none of the students were able to complete the activity of daily living. After peer instruction, with the literacy-based story, all four participants showed gains and were able to maintain those gains in a maintenance phase for one month after the initial intervention. Although Brady et al. (2016) reported gains in task completion utilizing a peer delivered literacy-based story, there are several areas that would make it difficult for generalization. First, it was a small study of only four participants and examined the learning of one skill of daily living. Second, there was not a comparison group to test the effectiveness of the story in the absence of the peer. Finally, the learners were all taught the same skill with the same story making it difficult to expand on the effectiveness of the intervention beyond that one activity of daily living. What Brady et al. (2016) contributed was a need for research in literacy-based instructional methods for young adults with autism who are preparing to transition to adult life in community settings. The implication for the results of the Brady et al. (2016) study is profound in that adolescent peers were successful at delivering a

literacy-based intervention for learners who would soon be looking to parents and support professionals to teach social and daily living skills training.

A literature review of the effectiveness of Social Stories™ for students with autism was conducted by Karal and Wolfe in 2018. Their review spanned studies that were conducted over the course of 22 years, beginning in 1993 and consisted of criteria that required the studies to have been peer reviewed, utilized participants that were diagnosed with autism and focused on the use of story-based interventions that included an emphasis toward social communication, social engagement, or socially appropriate behavior. The result of the initial literature scan based on the criteria that Karal and Wolfe (2018) set forth yielded 12 peer reviewed journal articles which concluded that story-based instruction is moderately effective. Additionally, the researchers concluded that although it is difficult to determine the true level of effectiveness of the story-based intervention it can provide a favorable outcome for individuals with autism.

Self Determination and Quality of Life

Examining how individuals with autism identify ingredients for a life filled with quality will better position us to match instructional strategies that have been rooted in research. Thompson et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive study aimed at identifying those areas that parents of young adults with autism deemed to be essentially important for their children as they transitioned into adulthood. Often the fears of what would happen to their adult children when they, their parents, could no longer care for them dominated the data collected. A prevalence of parental concern regarding how they envisioned their children's quality of life emerged and was defined in a threefold manner of being understood, being able to understand the world around them, and success, often

in employment opportunities (Thompson et al., 2018). Although insightful, Thompson and colleagues provided no data regarding how the young adults with autism defined their own quality of life.

Biggs and Carter (2017) identified that although there is a myriad of instructional packages and information about the importance of enhancing the quality of life for students with autism, there remains a lack of subjective insights from those living with autism about their definition of quality of life. Individuality measures for defining quality of life have been examined in several studies and have yielded a glimpse into the collective sentiment of many adults living with autism and how they perceive their needs and desires for self-determination. As a consumer of any product, education and social services notwithstanding, being asked the questions is half the battle to finding the solutions. Hurlbutt and Chalmers (2002) conducted interviews with three adults living with autism. They posed opinion questions ranging from group living in residential placements to what the public should know about people living with autism. A trend in the responses of the participants in their study raised concerns over the lack of employment opportunities for adults with autism. One participant responded to the question of employment by saying the following:

I was fired because either I asked too many questions or didn't ask enough. People with autism have bad experiences with jobs and it's not that we are not good at working it's that we are not good at dealing with people. Jobs are usually 80% social (conversation, lunch, breaks, chit-chat) and 20% work. People with autism are better the other way around. (p. 108).

Further exploration into the narrative accounts provided a specific analysis of how the literacy-based intervention known as a social story strategy would have proved beneficial. Two participants in Hurlbutt and Chalmers' research indicated they wished they had received more instruction on the use of social stories to assist them in maintaining employment. One participant stated, "Most people with autism are visual learners, so use social stories to teach social skills that are needed to be successful" (p.109). Xenia, another participant expressed her opinion that social stories would have been invaluable when she was in school. Xenia stated the following:

Social stories would have helped me with socializing with my peers. I had a hard time getting along with other students. The reason why was because of the way I came off socially. At that time, I had no idea that I was doing that because there were no gentle techniques like social stories or explanations to the other students on why I did things different. (p. 109).

Social skills are invaluable skills for learners with autism, and both parents of young adults with autism and adults with autism themselves, have expressed a need to develop their social skills to increase their capacity to exercise their self-determination and enhance their quality of life. Further review involving the instructional practice and efficacy of story-based instruction as an effective literacy-based intervention for supporting learners with autism yielded hopeful insights.

Story-based instruction in general provides hope for developing a myriad of skills in learners with autism that can assist them in living a quality of life as they define it yet more research is needed to identify the tenets of the interventions that can be utilized by support professionals, family members, and community service staff. These

professionals are responsible to teach socially appropriate skills to adults living with autism and other developmental disabilities who desire to fully manifest their self-determination. Biggs and Carter (2017) found that self-determination was positively correlated to perceived quality of life for transition age youth with disabilities and utilized the AIR Self-Determination scale. This scale could be utilized in future research with studies that correlate the effectiveness of literacy-based interventions with adult learners with autism and their perceived levels of self-determination. Additionally, if peers, as in Brady et al. (2016) are finding success with using Social Story™ in scaffolding skill acquisition for their fellow learners with autism then the use of these strategies may be of value for support staff who provide community-based services that will promote self-determination in adult learners with autism that have transitioned from school settings and seek employment opportunities in their communities.

Although Karal and Wolfe (2018) provided the most current review of the literature for story-based interventions with students who have autism, none of the works reviewed were focused on students over the age of 13. The NSP Phase 2 report included adults aged 22 and up yet it yielded only one intervention category that was deemed *Established*. It is essential that research should also be geared towards studies that focus on adult learners who have aged out of school and are living in community settings much like those who participated in the research of Hurlburt and Chalmers (2002).

This body of research is encouraging and yet for the past 20 years community-based residential settings operated by state as well as non-profit agencies have produced little to no research involving the use of evidence-based strategies or the professional

development needs of the teaching professionals that provide lifelong functional academic skills to adult learners with autism and other developmental disabilities.

The Roles of Direct Support Professionals

Over the past 50 years, research in literacy development, strategies to increase communication and adaptive behavior of children with autism and other developmental disabilities, as well as strong parent advocacy have informed educational policies and key pieces of legislation. Commensurate with the discussion of how research can inform practice for this population of learners requires an understanding of the efforts to prepare and continually develop the capacity of teachers and teaching professionals.

Students with disabilities have only had a legally protected right to attend public school since the passing of The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) in 1975. Until this time, many students with disabilities were not allowed to attend school at all. The political reaction to the Willowbrook Consent Judgement (1975), which stipulated the state had a responsibility to educate and to ready each person for life in the community, spawned further action for education reform. In the 1970s and 1980s, due to strong parent advocacy, students with “mild disabilities” were mainstreamed with more frequency into regular classrooms (Causton & Tracy-Bronson, 2015). Significant legislative changes began to take shape providing for equal protection and opportunity under the law. The federal government began to require states to provide education and community services to families and individuals with developmental disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and elaborated on the inclusion of children with disabilities into regular classes. This act also ensured equal access of people with

disabilities to employment opportunities (Thompson et al., 2018). The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 emphasized academic outcomes, higher expectations, and supported the school-to work transition planning process for students with disabilities. As the classroom doors swung wide open, mainstream and inclusive classroom environments would also have to address the differentiated literacy and learning needs of students.

In 2000, with the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, the federal government provided financial assistance to states and public and nonprofit agencies to support community-based delivery of services to persons with developmental disabilities. Community-based residential settings for young adults with autism and other developmental disabilities, who had transitioned from the school system, were seeing a shift from a traditional caregiver environment toward a more outcome driven, educational model. In recent years, this shift in policy and ideology has resulted in the development of a national level code of ethics, and a set of New York State core professional competencies for the DSP (Hewitt et al., 2017). Similar to their certified and licensed teaching counterparts, DSPs are often unionized members of the workforce. In 2001, the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) raised the national profile of direct support and introduced professional standards. In partnership with the U.S Department of Labor, NADSP crafted apprenticeship standards that are currently used by employers and states to provide the structure for professional certification and credentialing programs (Bogenschutz et al., 2015).

Raising the standards of providing lifelong support services to adults with autism and other developmental disabilities has given way to the transformation and professionalization of the DSP role. DSPs, however, have for many years been a

workforce prone to low wages, little to no benefits, and minimal training which is often geared more towards meeting occupational health and safety regulations (Bogenschutz et al., 2015). In a recent survey, aimed at understanding the DSP workforce crisis related to retention and recruitment, Johnson (2019) found that DSPs rank the need for more professional development and training at the top of their lists. Further inquiry identified that the types of professional development DSPs were craving were geared toward meeting their own recently professionalized competencies which reflect ways to teach and address the needs of the individuals they are supporting. A review of the research on professional development has shown an absence of studies designed for this population of teaching professionals, therefore it is necessary to turn to the literature involving teacher centered research in professional development.

Staff/Professional Development for Teaching Professionals

Professional development has been a key component of efforts to reform and improve students' educational outcomes since the 1980's (Guskey, 1995). The discussion on how best to conduct professional development that ultimately results in increased learner achievement has resulted in numerous paradigms and criteria for facilitating such programs. Linked to New York State's revised teacher certification requirements, the concept that teachers must engage in ongoing professional development to renew their credentials has been in place since early 2004. Guskey (1997) suggested four similar professional development tenets that have evidenced an increase in student learning outcomes: (a) focus on learners and learning; (b) concentrate on organizational and individual change; (c) stay directed by the larger vision when making small changes; (d) embed ongoing professional development in daily practices and procedures.

Prior to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Kennedy (1998) conducted a review to analyze the effectiveness on student outcomes from professional development programs. That review showed the importance to focus on high quality, evidenced based content material for teachers' professional development. Yoon et al. (2007) compiled a review of over 1,300 studies that purported to address the effects of teacher professional development on student achievement. Their findings suggested that only nine studies met the rigorous evidenced based standards of the What Works Clearinghouse and revealed that studies with more than 14 hours of professional development showed a positive impact on student achievement. Furthermore, Yoon et al. (2007) concluded these nine studies indicated that an average of 49 hours of effective professional development could improve student achievement by 21 percentile points.

In recent years, reflection has become a key piece of teacher education programs and a popular topic for teacher professional development workshops. Schon (1983) held the belief that sustainable professional change occurs when teachers engage in purposeful, and systematic reflection. However, purposeful, systematic reflection is underutilized by many educators (Rodgers, 2002). One of the reasons why this type of reflection is not widely employed by teachers is simply because many teachers may not truly understand how to engage and implement this type of reflection in their current practice; they have not been exposed to this type of purposeful reflection (Rodgers, 2002). Teachers must recognize themselves as agents for change based on observations of student learning and progress monitoring (Nielsen et al., 2008).

The changing landscape of learning environments, whether they are brick and mortar or virtual, serving children or adults, should be provided with research to inform

decision making that builds the capacity of the teaching professional. Brock and Carter (2015) explored the effects of a professional development package for paraprofessionals serving students with disabilities. They found that paraprofessionals had rarely been exposed to the use of evidenced-based strategies during professional development sessions and lacked training on teaching principles despite their important role in the daily learning environment.

Conceptual Framework

Direct Support Professionals in New York State are responsible to teach the many socially appropriate skills that are needed by adults living with autism who desire to fully manifest their self-determination, employment goals, and quality of life interests (Higgins et al., 2008). Formal educational preparation and traditional learning environments rarely exist between Direct Support Professionals and the adults they are facilitating learning opportunities for (Larson & Hewitt, 2005). Nonetheless, there is a congruent relationship between the roles of DSPs and teachers who apply principles of task analysis, systems of least prompts, modeling, and strategies to scaffold learners' abilities to acquire a wealth of adaptive living and functional academic skills.

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1993) Social cognitive theory (SCT) has its historical roots in behaviorism, but, as the name implies, it has evolved over the years into a more cognitive perspective (Kim & Baylor, 2006). A key premise of this theory suggests that how people behave, motivate themselves, feel, perceive situations, and cognitively digest information stems from their beliefs and levels of knowledge. Social cognitive theorists view learning as a change in mental processes that creates the capacity to demonstrate

different behaviors (Hill, 2002). Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the sources of action required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1986). SCT suggests that when met with situational demands, every person undertakes a self-reflective analysis of their abilities to meet such demands. Given this internal reflection, people will act in tandem with what they believe they can manage and achieve. Bandura (1977) believes that this imaginable self-judgement will also regulate a person's emotional reactions to a task as well as their persistence to engage in it. As a result, perceptions and abstract symbolization are often involved in efficacy beliefs. DSPs are teaching professionals whose classroom is the natural learning environment. Choosing to facilitate learning activities, both planned and unplanned require not only knowledge of strategies but a willingness to engage in and a belief that there is value and utility in the activity itself. Bandura's social-cognitive theory has a focus on learning through the social environment which encourages the concepts of lifelong learning. Additionally, through the lens of self-efficacy and self-regulation the element of intrinsic motivation of the human person is infused into the social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). These person-centered tenets provide an authentic backdrop for the adult learner to engage in their own capacity building.

Adult Learning Theory

Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy stands parallel with social-cognitive theory as a framework for this study. Andragogy assumes that similar to the attributes of SCT, adults are driven by internal motives. Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory suggests that adults differ from children in that they are more willing to learn when learning is perceived as relevant to their environment and has immediate value. Adults use their past

experiences to connect to learning, receive relevance, and inspire new ideas. Adults are independent and want to be in control of their own paths to learning, while connecting real world learning to task-oriented and problem-solving situations (Knowles, 1980). Sharing the constructs of adult learning theory in teacher training, Ross-Gordon (2011) suggested that organizations should develop programs to build the capacity of their adult workforce due to the varied roles and multitasking behaviors found in adult learners. Therefore, this suggests that the more you provide opportunities for adult learners to be self-sufficient the greater the likelihood that those learners will experience the freedom to increase their self-regulated standards and strive to improve their own skills.

Summary

Generally, it would seem that research data have shown that when adults with intellectual disabilities are provided with opportunities to broaden their literacy education through appropriate teaching and learning strategies they continue to develop and improve their language and literacy skills. However, adolescent and adult learning, especially literacy learning, is not often considered an option for individuals with moderate and higher support needs due to their intellectual disability (van Kraayenoord et al., 2002). Story-based instruction in general provides hope for developing a myriad of skills in learners with autism that can assist them in living a quality of life as they define it, yet more research is needed to identify the tenets of the interventions that can be utilized by support professionals. These professionals are responsible to teach the many socially appropriate and functional academic skills that are needed by adults living with autism who desire to fully manifest their self-determination. Biggs and Carter (2017) found that self-determination was positively correlated to perceived quality of life for

transition age youth with disabilities. To this end, research has provided a glimpse into the relational context of DSPs and those receiving support services in community settings. We know a great deal about the desire of adults with developmental disabilities who want to gain further independence, live self-directed lives and pursue opportunities within their communities as evidenced by the key legislative acts and educational reform over the last 50 years. However, little is known about the life-long learning of the adult living with autism or other developmental disabilities in community-based residential settings. Likewise, research has provided limited detail regarding information on what Direct Support Professionals consider to be vitally important to their success and ability to meet the expectations of their mandated core competencies and code of ethics.

Furthermore, what is largely absent in the current research is evidence of the perceptions, beliefs, or input of the support professional regarding the professional development they receive to meet the needs of the growing population of adults with autism who have transitioned from school settings to adult community-based programs. Since March 2017, DSPs have been required by the NYS Office For People With Developmental Disabilities to adhere to the NYS DSP Core Competencies (NYS ADM#2014-03). To date, no qualitative study has provided information regarding DSPs' perceptions of the professional development they receive to build their core competencies which includes individual and group instruction. This study provided insights into the adult learner who, similar to the classroom paraprofessional, has had minimal formal education or experiences in evidence-based literacy strategies. Understanding the perceptions and lived experience of DSPs involved in this study can inform the design and implementation of future professional development sessions. Providing DSPs with

opportunities to experience staff development aimed at building their capacity as teaching professionals by providing them with more autonomy over their learning may lead to increased motivation. Motivation to learn something significantly affects transfer of learning and has an impact on the quantity of time that individuals are willing to commit to learning something new (Bransford et al., 2000). If DSPs believe that the professional development they attend is relevant to their professional contexts, they may be more likely to learn the material, seek out information about the topic at hand, and implement strategies with the adult learners they are teaching. Ultimately, by building the capacity of DSPs to deliver instruction, the needs of the adults they support will have a better opportunity for meaningful and measurable outcomes.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This study is designed to better understand the lived experience of Direct Support Professionals who participated in a staff development training that utilized a literacy-based strategy to promote the social skills of adult learners with autism and other developmental disabilities. According to Christensen et al. (2010) the primary objective of a phenomenological study is to explicate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a person, or a group of people, around a specific phenomenon. Data was collected over a 16-week period and included semi-structured and open-ended interviews, a questionnaire, and reflective summaries from each of the 6 DSP participants.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological was to discover Direct Support Professionals' (DSPs) perceptions of their lived experience with a staff development session designed for creating a literacy-based social skills strategy known as Social Stories™ or story-based instruction. This study explored the perceived self-efficacy of DSPs to utilize social stories as a teaching tool, to understand their perceptions regarding how the staff development session influences their skills as teaching professionals, and to what extent the DSPs perceive the impact of the social story strategy to be on adult learners with autism and other developmental disabilities.

The following research questions that guided this study were:

1. What do DSPs perceive about the experience of the staff development training for creating social stories?

2. What do DSPs perceive the impact of the experience of a staff development training for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy to be as it relates to their teaching skills?
3. How does the experience of the staff development training for creating social stories impact the DSP's perceived ability to meet the requirements of the New York State Core Competencies for Direct Support Professionals?
4. What do DSPs perceive the impact of the staff development training for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy to be on the quality of life for the adult learners with autism or other developmental disabilities that they support?

This chapter describes the study's research methodology. The chapter will discuss the following areas: (a) research design, (b) research study, (c) procedure, (d) data collection, and (e) data analysis.

Research Design

This study employs a phenomenological approach to collect and analyze the data. To develop a rich description of a phenomenon, researchers may tend to choose an information-rich case whereby the participants can illuminate the phenomenon for a detailed study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Creswell (2007) holds that a phenomenological study provides a description of a shared experience among several individuals. I chose this approach for its ability to gather rich insights and perspectives of the participants. Phenomenology allows me to reflect on what participants said, to see the experiences through the participants' eyes, and to understand what it was like for the participants

(Moustakas, 1994). This approach is rooted in the description of the discovery found through the process of exploration. Exploration included the use of unstructured in-depth interviews supplemented by participant reflections and researcher coded data resulting in thematic clusters of lived experience. Phenomenology looks at the structure of various types of experience including perception, thought, memory, and imagination (Creswell, 2007). This study is aligned with Husserl's transcendental or descriptive phenomenological approach as it centers on not only what DSPs experienced but also how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

The Research Study

The research procedures for this study utilized a phenomenological qualitative design exploring the lived experience of 6 Direct Support Professionals who received a staff development session focusing on creating a literacy-based social skill strategy known as Social Stories™. Kimberly's (2007) multiple baseline design was utilized to determine if paraprofessionals could effectively be taught to write and implement Social Stories™ for school children diagnosed with autism. Although this research study was aimed at understanding the lived experience of DSPs involved in a staff development session, a similar training protocol for writing/creating Social Stories™ indicated in Kimberly (2007) was utilized.

The staff development training experience was conducted in one 3-hour session. The introduction focused on social understanding and social differences in adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders and other intellectual disabilities. A Social Story™ accurately describes a context, skill, achievement, or concept according to 10 defining criteria. These criteria guide story research, development, and implementation to ensure

an overall patient and supportive quality, and a format, “voice”, content, and learning experience that is descriptive, meaningful, and physically, socially, and emotionally safe for the person (Gray 2020). Social Stories™ were formally introduced in Social Stories™: Improving Responses of Students with Autism with Accurate Information, in Focus on Autistic Behavior (Gray & Garand, 1993). The article listed Social Story Guidelines, which became defining characteristics (criteria) in Social Stories™ 10.0 (Gray, 2004). Subsequent revisions and reorganization resulted in Social Stories™ 10.1 (Gray, 2010) and Social Stories™ 10.2 (Gray, 2014). Since the beginning, the Social Story ‘basics’ have remained the same. Over time, research and experience has resulted in increased detail and reorganization. The definition of a Social Story™ is periodically updated with the criteria to reflect shifts in emphasis and detail. Social Stories™ 10.2 (Gray, 2014) criteria are as follows:

1. The Social Story™ Goal. Authors follow a defined process to share accurate information using a content, format, and voice that is descriptive, meaningful, and physically, socially, and emotionally safe for the audience.
2. Two-Step Discovery. Authors gather information to 1) improve their understanding of the Audience in relation to a situation, skill, or concept and 2) identify the topic and focus of each Story/Article. At least 50% of all Social Stories applaud achievements.
3. Three Parts and a Title. A Social Story™ Article has a title and introduction that clearly identifies the topic, a body that adds detail, and a conclusion that reinforces and summarizes the information.

4. **FOURmat.** The Social Story format is tailored to the individual abilities, attention span, learning style and - whenever possible – talents and/or interests of its Audience.
5. **Five Factors Define Voice and Vocabulary.** A Social Story™/Article has a patient and supportive “voice” and vocabulary that is defined by five factors. These factors are: 1) First- or Third-Person Perspective; 2) Past, Present, and/or Future Tense; 3) Positive and Patient Tone; 4) Literal Accuracy; and 5) Accurate Meaning.
6. **Six Questions Guide Story Development.** A Social Story™ answers relevant ‘wh’ questions that describe context, including place (WHERE), time-related information (WHEN), relevant people (WHO), important cues (WHAT), basic activities, behaviors, or statements (HOW), and the reasons or rationale behind them (WHY).
7. **Seven is About Sentences.** A Social Story™ is comprised of Descriptive Sentences, as well as optional Coaching Sentences. Descriptive Sentences accurately describe relevant aspects of context, including external and internal factors, while adhering to all applicable Social Story™ Criteria.
8. **A GR-EIGHT Formula.** One Formula ensures that every Social Story describes more than directs.
9. **Nine to Refine.** A story draft is always reviewed and revised if necessary to ensure that it meets all defining Social Story™ criteria.
10. **Ten Guides to Implementation.** The Ten Guides to Implementation ensure that the Goal that guides Story/Article development is also evident in its use.

They are: 1) Plan for Comprehension; 2) Plan Story Support; 3) Plan Story Review; 4) Plan a Positive Introduction; 5) Monitor; 6) Organize the Stories; 7) Mix & Match to Build Concepts; 8) Story Re-runs and Sequels to Tie Past, Present, and Future; 9) Recycle Instruction into Applause; 10) Stay Current on Social Story™ Research and Update (Gray 2020).

Participants viewed a video on how to write social stories followed by a discussion on adapting the information for adults. Next, participants engaged in a case study scenario by following the seven step process outlined by Swaggart, et. al. (1995). Identify a target behavior or problem situation for social-story intervention. 2. Define target behaviors for data collection. 3. Collect baseline data on the target social behavior. 4. Write a short social story using descriptive, directive, perspective and control sentences. 5. Place one to three sentences on each page. 6. Use photographs, hand-drawn pictures, or pictorial icons.

7. Read the social story to the learner and model the desired behavior.

Guided and independent practice for DSPs on how to create a social story included socially appropriate skills for mitigating the transmission of COVID-19. The staff development session concluded with a demonstration on how to implement digital tools and printed materials for sharing social stories. Participants received a certificate of participation for completing the staff development session. The staff development session was held individually as a one to one instruction with each of the participants in the telecommunication platform of ZOOM. Due to the COVID-19 protocols restricting in-person training the telecommunications platform was used for the one to one interviews, and staff development session.

Upon the completion of the staff development session participants were scheduled for their one to one interviews which took place approximately four weeks after the staff development session. Additionally, instructions for the reflective journals (Part 1 & 2) were reviewed with each participant to ensure their understanding. The use of these reflective self-reports served as contemporaneous assessment methods and provided the participant (adult learner) with more autonomy to share what they want, as well as when and to what extent (Bolger, et al. 2003).

The timeline for the procedures of this study are illustrated in Table 3.1

Table 3.1

Timeline of Study

Research Step	Action	Timeframe	Additional Actions
IRB Approval	Commence Study	Upon Approval	Acceptable Proposal Defense
Permission to Contact Employees (DSPs)	CEO Letter	September 15, 2020	
Participant Interest Emails	Distribute Via Email	Sept 15-30, 2020	
Analyze Participant Responses	Review for Criteria	Sept 30, 2020	Select 6 Participants
Schedule 1 st Round Interviews Questionnaires	Participants Sign Consent Forms	Sept 30- Oct 10, 2020	
Conduct 1 st Round Interviews Questionnaires		Oct 10 -Oct 30, 2020	
Conduct Staff Development	Instruction on Creating Literacy-based Social Skill Strategy	Nov 1-10 th , 2020	Instruct on Written Reflections
Collect Written Reflection Part 1		Nov 10-17,2020	
Collect Written Reflection Part 2 Conduct 2 nd Round of Interviews		Nov 17-24, 2020 Nov 14-Dec 1, 2020	
Data Analysis/Findings		Dec 2020-Jan 2021	

The study site chosen was a non-profit agency supporting individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities in community residential settings located in the Mid-Hudson Region of New York State. The agency employs over 350 Direct Support Professionals and provides community-based services to over 1,200 individuals, ranging from five to 80 years of age. For this study, all of the people supported by the DSPs are adult persons with autism or other intellectual disabilities who are receiving community-based residential services. The agency that employs the participant DSPs is regulated by the New York State Office of Persons with Developmental Disabilities. In an effort to protect the participants, who are considered essential workers defined in New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo's executive order No. 202, and the researcher, all interviews and delivery of professional development session took place using the telecommunication platform, Zoom. The telecommunication interviews were recorded using Zoom and transcribed initially using NVivo transcription followed by additional checks and manual editing for accuracy and inflection as needed. The verbatim transcriptions were generated for analysis.

A questionnaire was emailed to participants to gather demographic data including prior staff development experience, length of time as a DSP, and awareness of core professional competencies defined by New York State's Office For Persons With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) for Direct Support Professionals. The questionnaires provided an opportunity for participants to recollect concepts and understandings that were then discussed and probed further in the interview sessions (Adamson, et al. 2004). Interviews were conducted prior to the professional development session and approximately four weeks after the professional development session.

Interviews provided rich, thick descriptions of participants' perceptions of the staff development session and allowed for further exploration of participants' written reflections collected during the time period after which the participants received the professional development.

The staff development session was a three-hour presentation which centered on how to create social stories. During the independent practice section of the staff development session, the participants created a social story addressing social skills content relevant to COVID-19 guidance from the Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for hand hygiene, facial coverings, and social distancing.

In order to collect data contemporaneously from the participants they were requested to complete written reflections that were aimed at exploring their beliefs, perceptions, and efficacy for the usefulness of the literacy-based strategy. This allowed for participants to readily document the utility of the social skill strategy as they reflected on their daily teaching experiences as Direct Support Professionals.

The questionnaire, interviews, and reflective summaries allowed for data convergence and triangulation in order to develop a comprehensive analysis of the data. Furthermore, all interviews, written reflections, and the staff development session took place during non-working hours while the Direct Support Professionals were off shift and not during any part of their paid hourly work schedules. I collected written reflective summaries from each of the six participant Direct Support Professionals over the course of four to six weeks after they received the staff development session.

To protect the privacy of the participants and the agency, the pseudonym Redrock Programs was used throughout the study. As the Director of Staff Development for

Redrock Programs I have a professional relationship with the DSPs who are the participants in this study. Choosing this agency allowed the participants and myself to schedule interviews and meetings through telecommunications and via phone at convenient times for the DSPs.

Procedure

Permission to contact DSPs working at the selected agency was requested in writing from the CEO. Upon securing written permission to contact potential participants, an email was sent to solicit those DSPs who met the targeted criteria. Through this purposive sampling I obtained six participant DSPs for this study who met the following criteria: (a) participant DSPs will be employed for a minimum of three months with Redrock Programs, (b) participant DSPs will be considered full time employees, working at minimum 32 hours a week, (c) participant DSPs will have received an, at minimum, an initial evaluation of their core competency skill area, usually conducted within the first six months of their employment as a DSP. Once six participants were selected they were sent a consent form explaining the study and remuneration for their participation. Upon receipt of signed consent forms, participants were contacted to schedule their interviews, and staff development session. Telecommunications for data collection (Zoom) was used to allow me to participate directly with the participants. The first interview occurred approximately one week prior to the participant engaging in the staff development session for creating social stories and the second interview took place approximately six weeks after the participant experienced the staff development session.

Once data for this study was collected via two separate 30-60-minute interviews with each participant, the recorded interviews were stored electronically on a password encrypted device. NVivo software was utilized to provide the transcription of the recorded participant interviews. Once the software completed the transcription for each participant, I compared the transcriptions with the notes taken during their interviews.

Participants' Profiles

The participants for this study consisted of six DSPs who were current employees of Redrock Programs, a voluntary, non-profit agency that provides community-based services to children, adults, and their families living with autism and other developmental disabilities. Purposive sampling included recruiting both beginning DSPs and experienced DSPs with two or more years of work experience to facilitate cross case comparisons. Furthermore, all interviews, written reflections, and the staff development session took place during non-working hours while the Direct Support Professionals were on their personal time and not during any part of their paid hourly work schedules. The genders of the Direct Support Professionals included two males and four females.

Initially, permission from the Chief Executive Officer of Redrock Programs was sought to contact and recruit Direct Support Professionals who were currently employed by Redrock Programs (see Appendix A). Recruitment consisted of a notice sent to all employees of Redrock Programs, Inc. who had the job title of Direct Support Professional (see Appendix B). The researcher chose six Direct Support Professionals to participate in this qualitative study. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) participant DSPs will be employed for a minimum of three months with Redrock Programs, (b) participant DSPs will be considered full time employees,

working at minimum 32 hours a week, (c) participant DSPs will have received an, at minimum, an initial evaluation of their core competency skill area, usually conducted within the first six months of their employment as a DSP . All DSPs fitting these criteria were recruited for the study. Participating DSPs were provided with the participant consent form (see Appendix C) which contained further details and contact information of the mentor faculty member overseeing the research. Once the DSP participant(s) provided the signed consent form, the researcher discussed individually with each participant the procedures for the research study and reviewed details of their participation. Depending upon the number of qualifying, and interested participants, the selection of six DSPs was based on time in position to account for beginning DSPs and more experienced DSPs. Additionally, selection of participants attempted to ensure differences in gender and cultural background.

Given that all interviews, written reflections, and the staff development session were held while the Direct Support Professionals were on their personal time and not during any part of their paid hourly work schedule, a Visa Gift Card in the amount of \$40 was given to each participant. Additionally, each participant received a Certificate of Completion for the staff development session.

In no particular order, the following summaries are used to provide rich context and insight into the experience and educational level of the participants. This data was collected from the use of the questionnaire.

Ava is a female DSP who has a bachelor's degree or higher. Her experience level includes 10 or more years as a DSP. Ava indicated she participates fairly often in

informal learning opportunities outside of her assigned work schedule. Ava indicated she rarely is offered professional development.

Jeff is a male DSP who has indicated some college courses. His experience level includes 10 or more years as a DSP. Jeff indicated he does not regularly participate in informal learning opportunities outside of his assigned work schedule. Jeff indicated he does not receive staff development training in any courses other than required annual safety trainings.

Alfonso is a male DSP who has an associate degree or higher, but less than a bachelor's degree. His experience level includes one to two years as a DSP. Alfonso indicated that he fairly often participates in informal learning opportunities outside of his assigned work schedule. Alfonso indicated he does not receive staff development training in any courses other than required annual safety trainings.

Taylor is a female DSP who has indicated some college courses. Her experience level includes one to two years as a DSP. Taylor indicated that she does not regularly participate in informal learning opportunities outside of her assigned work schedule. Taylor indicated she does not receive staff development training in any courses other than required annual safety trainings.

Nora is a female DSP who has indicated she holds a master's degree. Her experience level includes five to 10 years as a DSP. Nora indicated that she does not regularly participate in informal learning opportunities outside of her assigned work schedule. Nora indicated she does not receive staff development training in any courses other than required annual safety trainings.

Kelly is a female DSP who has indicated some college courses. Her experience level includes two to five years as a DSP. Kelly indicated that she rarely participates in informal learning opportunities outside of her assigned work schedule. Kelly indicated she does not receive staff development training in any courses other than required annual safety trainings.

Data Collection

Data was collected through questionnaires, one to one semi-structured interviews, and written participant generated reflections. Following the timeline for this study, participants completed a questionnaire (see Appendix D), which focused on their understanding of the core competencies of their profession and previous experiences with staff development. Demographic data was collected at that time by using the emailed questionnaire. Open ended questionnaires assisted in obtaining information that could inform the interview process. Utilizing questionnaires to generate a narrative response from participants has been evident in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Prior to conducting the first interview I reviewed the completed questionnaire for each participant. I conducted the first interview with the participants upon completion of their questionnaire to probe their understanding and add depth to their individual responses.

Furthermore, because of the qualitative design of the study, personal identifying indicators of participants arose during the data collection and analysis. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. All identifying indicators of the participants were redacted. Participant interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted through the telecommunication platform, Zoom. Transcriptions contained the pseudonym along with my researcher notes

generated during the study. All pseudonymized data was organized and stored in separate paper files and electronic folders on an external, password encrypted device.

Data Analysis

The results of this study have been written in an effort true to the phenomenological design, that is to capture the complexity and ambiguity of the lived experience being described. I have aimed to include examples and quotations from the data to illustrate points made by the participants, thereby bringing readers into a closer relationship with the lived experience of the DSPs. I followed the phenomenological data analysis methods noted by Moustakas (1994), which Giorgi (1997) outlined as the following sequential steps: (1) collection of verbal data and the transcription into scripts, (2) reading of the data, (3) breaking of the data (coding) into meaningful parts, (4) organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective, and (5) synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community.

Aligned with the specific criteria for descriptive phenomenological methods of qualitative research by Giorgi (1997) and Creswell and Creswell's (2013) data analysis steps, I analyzed interview data by using a sequential process.

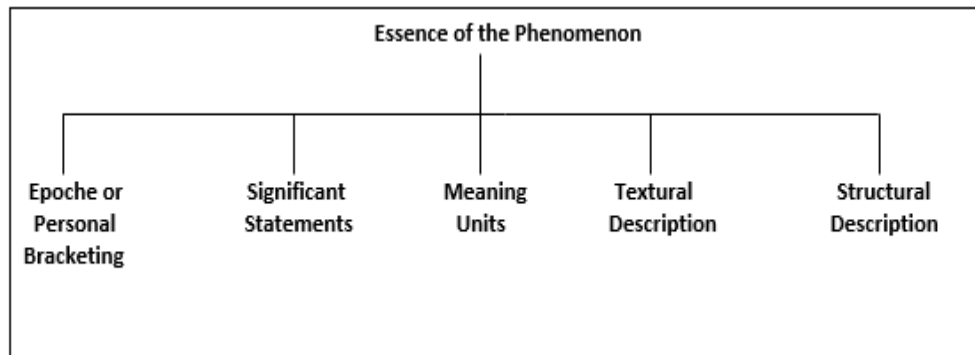
1. Global Sense. I read the entire description in order to get a general sense of the DSPs perceptions of their experience of having participated in the staff development session. This took several readings which required me to be contemplative and aware of my own thoughts thereby removing personal influence (epoche).

2. Discrimination of meaning units (codes). Once the global understanding had been understood, I returned to each text and read through them again and began to assign meaning to the constructs identified.
 - A. I took the total of all responses specific to each interview questions and began to look for meaningful statements related to them.
 - B. I highlighted and coded significant quotes, sentences and statements.
3. Finding the essence. I analyzed the codes or meaning units to determine any patterns arising from the data.
 - A. While I reread each transcript I reflected on each of the meaning units (codes), which I fully stated in the concrete language of the participants and which describes the essence of the statement for the participant.
 - B. As patterns were identified I transformed the codes into consistent statements or themes of the participants' lived experience.
 - C. I utilized Bogdan and Biklen's (2003) guide for potential codes: (a) setting and context codes, (b) subjects' perspectives, (c) ways of thinking about people and objects held by the subjects, (d) process codes, (e) activity codes, (f) strategy codes, (g) relationship and social structure codes, and (h) pre-assigned coding schemes (pp. 161-168).
 - D. I completed this process for each participant's transcript in the study.

4. Final synthesis. Finally, I synthesized all of the statements regarding each participant's experience into one consistent statement that described and captured the essence of the experience being studied. (Adapted from Giorgi, 1985, 1997; Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003.) Coding a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007) aims to utilize a systematic approach that will ultimately yield the essence of the phenomenon (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

Essence of the Phenomenon (Creswell, 2007)



CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to discover DSP's perceptions of their lived experience of a staff development session designed for creating a literacy-based social skills strategy known as Social Stories™ or story-based instruction. The study explored the perceived self-efficacy of DSPs to utilize social stories as a teaching tool, to understand their perceptions regarding how the staff development session influenced their skills as teaching professionals, and to what extent the DSPs perceived the impact of the social story strategy to be on the quality of life of adult learners with autism and other developmental disabilities. The research questions were:

1. What do DSPs perceive about the experience of the staff development training for creating social stories?
2. What do DSPs perceive the impact of the experience of a staff development training for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy to be as it relates to their teaching skills?
3. How does the experience of the staff development training for creating social stories impact the DSP's perceived ability to meet the requirements of the New York State Core Competencies for Direct Support Professionals?
4. What do DSPs perceive the impact of the staff development training for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy to be on the quality of life for the adult learners with autism or other developmental disabilities

that they support?

Themes emerged within each research question from the data analysis phase of the study. Data consisting of the subjects' initial questionnaires, first interview session, two reflective summaries, and the final interview session were analyzed as described in the preceding chapter. The findings are organized as follows: For each research question listed, the relevant themes, and sub-themes if any, are identified followed by a rich textural and structural description of the subjects' experience.

Research Question 1

What do DSPs perceive about the experience of the staff development training for creating social stories? This research question was aimed at understanding the beliefs and perceptions of the DSPs who experienced the staff development session for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy as a tool for them to utilize in their efforts to teach social skills to the adults living with autism and other developmental disabilities that they provide support to. None of the six participants indicated that they had ever attended a staff development session for learning about the use of story based instruction, nor had they expressed any familiarity with the topic before attending the session although four of the six participants mentioned after the completion of the session that they had heard about this tool in use in other program areas of the agency. When probed further, the four participants indicated that they had some recollection of seeing materials used to teach individuals about handwashing, wearing masks, and social distancing due to the COVID-19 infection control measures but believed that only photos or pictures were involved and not written language.

The following theme emerged from an analysis of transcripts related to DSPs' perceptions of the staff development session: *Pictures build understanding*.

Theme 1: Pictures Build Understanding

All six participants noted that they perceived their experience with the social story staff development session to be useful in teaching social skills to the adult learners with intellectual disabilities that they support. When probed about the elements they found useful, all six noted that they thought the pictures chosen for each topic could help convey what the story was about. This was evidenced by Ava who noted, "I think that ... you can easily create something, especially with finding pictures anywhere on the web of something they (individuals supported) are looking for". Taylor stated, "I personally think it would be really useful. We use photos already so as long as they can recognize what's in the photo I think you can make social stories work with anyone."

Three of the six participants noted that learners who had not yet learned to read may struggle with the written language contained in the social story. Ava related this finding with the following insights.

So if we have someone that we're supporting, that doesn't have the best reading skills, utilizing a lot of pictures I think will be beneficial, especially because there are some individuals that we're supporting that are struggling with expressing themselves. I've already started thinking about what it always goes based off of, the learner and how well they're able to understand what you are trying to teach. So if it's that they aren't the most proficient with words, then it's going to be maybe more pictures or taking pictures of them doing what the skill is. This way

they can understand the meaning of what you're teaching. That's what I'm thinking.

Two of the six participants identified their perceptions that staff could benefit from using pictures in tandem with modeling to support and teach learners new skills. This was evident when Alfonso noted, "the learner is going to look at it (social story) kind of as a picture or words, you know, especially depending on their learning style. So if staff model what those pictures are, then that kind of puts the whole story together". Kelly noted, "I'm an English major, so the writing part wouldn't be very difficult for me, but I could use the pictures for sure and then model it or role play".

When asked about her perceptions of the staff development session Nora discussed how useful she thought the books (social stories) would be because many individuals she supports do not utilize spoken language to communicate. When probed to expand upon her perceptions she noted the following:

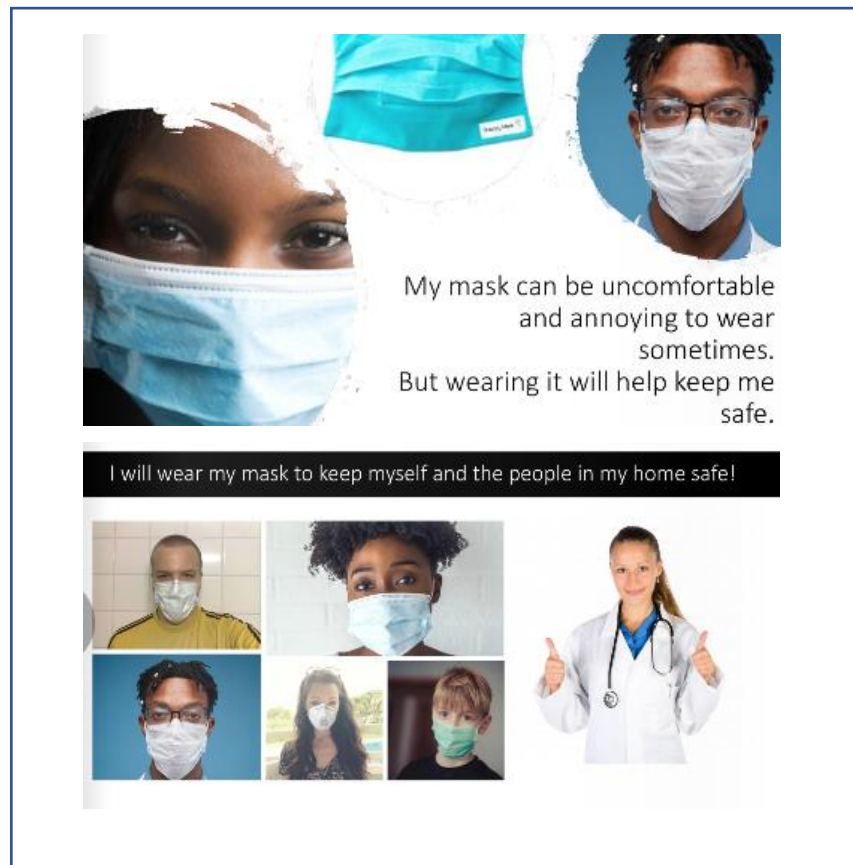
It's good to have a book or a board. So they (learners) can see it. I think the book, it's easier because you sit with them and go through the pages.. We use pictures and they get the message faster. Right. You still talk them through, but you have to use pictures. You have to be the interpreter for them with other people. This can be very useful, creating conversations with the person, trying to show them pictures if they're not verbal. I had an experience when we were at the dentist office and everybody's like, oh, my goodness, is he (individual supported) going to sit there waiting and wearing his mask the whole time? I was a little bit nervous, but I brought the photos and story about visiting the doctor and staying safe because of COVID-19. I would show him the photos and say the words to

keep your mask on and you have to stay safe. I took the little book because we waited so long for the doctor. When the doctor walked in I wanted to take the book back but Craig (individual supported) just kept it his hand and showed it to the doctor once we went into the exam room. He saw the photos and recognized where he was, I think.

I confirmed with Nora that the book she was referencing in her account of taking Craig on a medical appointment was from the material presented in the staff development session (See Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1

Excerpt from Wearing a Mask Social Story (LaVeglia 2020)



One participant explained how the staff development session influenced her to use pictures while supporting an individual to express their feelings. This was made evident when Taylor noted the following:

I actually enjoyed going through this whole series. It actually made some things easier at work, which helps a whole lot at times. There's times where we use pictures, we even have an emotional book now because Ryan (individual supported) is learning about emotions. It's great. So we kind of point out pictures for him to explain to us how he's feeling.

Five of the six participants referenced to some degree how important it is that the photos used in the social story depict real people. Alfonso illustrated this belief when he stated, "I think that if I were making a social story with one of the guys then it really has to have their picture in it, so they could see themselves and not any type of *Bitmoji*, that wouldn't work I don't think". Nora shared, "pictures have to have be in color, not the black and white setting like they have on the printer, that is ok, but color photos of real people, not stick people". When I asked Nora to share why she believed real photos should be used and not stick people she added the following:

They are adults and we can use real photos not those stick people like kids use, it's fine I guess for kids, but I wouldn't want to be teaching somebody like George who is all grown up using stick people pictures. I know we have those picture cards with stick people for some of the communication boards but I think they (individuals supported) pay more attention to real photos. You know, I'm a visual learner for my own learning needs. Just like the first thing in books is just pictures. Right. And I think that's exactly what social stories are supposed to be,

where they're not giving a lot of information, but they're giving enough information for the person to understand what you're what you're expecting.

Research Question 2

What do DSPs perceive the impact of the experience of a staff development training for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy to be as it relates to their teaching skills? This research question was aimed at understanding the beliefs and perceptions of the DSP participants as they reflected upon the staff development session and how the content of that session, specifically learning to create social stories in order to teach social skills to adult learners with autism and other developmental disabilities may affect their skills as a teaching professional. The following theme emerged from an analysis of transcripts related to DSPs' responses about the impact of the staff development session: *Recognizing teaching techniques*.

Theme 2: Recognizing Teaching Techniques

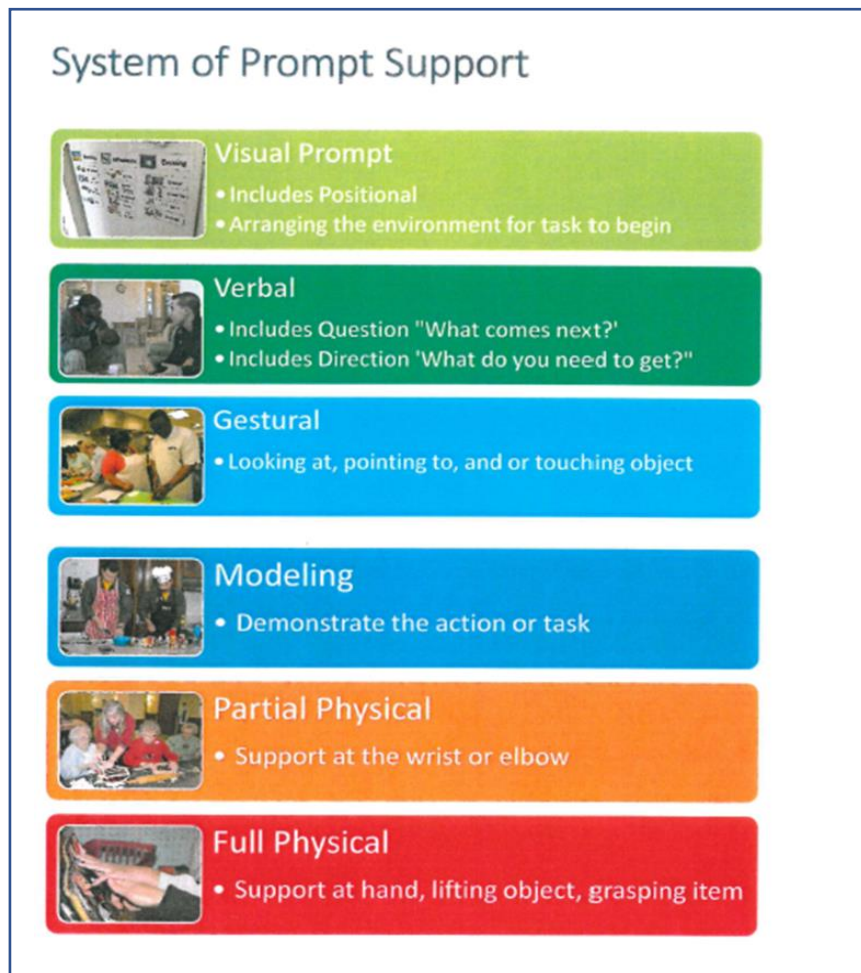
A key component of instruction can often include the application of prompting procedures. A prompt is a cue or instruction that is given before or during the learner's action or response and increases the likelihood that the person will emit a correct response and reduces the possibility of errors being made (Kearney, 2015). The agency that the participants work for, Redrock Programs (pseudonym) utilizes a hierarchical system that they label as "System of Prompt Support" (See Figure 4.2). This system is utilized to teach and record learners' responses to the instructional goals for each individual supported in the group home. These instructional goals are part of the learner's Life Plan and are required by the New York State Office for Persons with Developmental Disabilities. The system utilized by Redrock Programs is derived from

the categorization of prompts into a hierarchy known as “least to most” intrusive prompting and uses an array of prompts sequenced together for assisting a learner as they learn a new skill (Alberto & Troutman, 2013).

During Kelly’s final interview I asked her to talk more about her written reflection and if she noticed any other insights about her “new perspective”. She shared that she felt as though she was doing something important by becoming a Direct Support Professional and that “people aren’t aware” how hard it can be at times.

Figure 4.2

Teaching and scoring method for DSPs at Redrock Programs



She continued and made a point to say that though she had always known her working as a DSP and supporting adults with developmental disabilities was valuable and had a purpose, she didn't think "real" teachers felt that way about DSPs. "I had to attend meetings at the school when we were getting a new admission to the group home and I could tell that the teachers there thought we were just care takers", Kelly said as she raised her brows and puckered her lips. "I get it though, because we do so many things and now I can see that I am using these skills and teaching."

Jeff noted during his final interview that he felt confident in his ability to utilize social stories with the learners he works with because he believed he had been doing something similar in his day to day work as a DSP. Jeff stated "I can't believe how much I know but didn't realize I knew prior to this workshop. Also, some techniques I have implemented without knowing or realizing I was actually implementing them." When I posed a follow up question to Jeff's statement and asked him to tell me more about his realization he responded with laughter and said, "I'm like a walking social story, this is how I verbally prompt the individuals". He continued to laugh and told me I could ask the other DSPs he works with and they would tell me that he describes and explains situations as he is modeling the particular skills. Jeff shared a story to explain more about how he believed he has been using some of the teaching techniques he learned about in the staff development session when he had to explain social distancing to program learners at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So early in the pandemic we didn't know what to do. We had folks in each other's personal space, and it was like how we are going to teach this (social distancing). Two of the DSPs I was working on shift with helped me ask Jolie

and Kevin (individuals supported) to stand in the backyard and we used a tape measurer to mark off six feet. We took a photo of them standing six feet apart and printed it out and wrote two words on it... social and distance (laughing proudly). It may have only been one page of a social story, but it worked.

Along with Jeff and Kelly, both Ava and Taylor linked their experience of the staff development session to their current practices while supporting individual learners with developing social skills. Ava noted that she will often model the task first and explain or re-explain the steps if the person doesn't seem to understand it right way.

When we were learning about making social stories, I think I said this at the time, it's like even though I don't read aloud to the individual if I am teaching them I usually show them, or model it as we say, because there's so many variables that happen, especially when they're starting somewhere new. How do you meet people? How do you introduce yourself? That right there can be a social story and I'm already showing them parts of how to do that but lots of times I have to show them or tell them again and again.

Taylor shared in her final interview that when teaching individuals about table manners and handwashing skills during afternoon snack time, she will usually remind them of why it's important to not sit so close, and to take turns having snack instead of all eating at once given the protocols put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. "I will tell them; you live with other people and you don't want their germs and they don't want yours", she stated. Taylor seemed to think about her comment for a few moments and added, "I don't know if that has been helping but they (individuals supported) have a right to know why their routines got changed".

Participants also reported the use of reinforcement and reassurance in their roles as DSPs supporting individuals with developmental disabilities. Nora noted the use of positive reinforcement in the form of verbal praise and shaping. She stated, “you have to give praise when they respond, even if it is not exactly perfect”. Alfonso indicated that the affirming statements incorporated into the Social Story™ format was how he saw a large part of his role as a DSP especially when trying to explain the decisions that are made for individuals to keep them safe. He shared a story about a recent safeguard put in place that may have left the individual receiving services uncertain or anxious.

We have this system for one of the ladies, Carla so that she can let us know if she wants to go for a walk. It came about because Carla was given an instruction to go upstairs, get her coat and then come back downstairs so that we can go for a van ride. Staff stepped into the pantry area to gather the van book and then they couldn't find her in the house, and they started looking for her on the grounds. We had at least two or three staff looking for her. Eventually, one of the staff jumped in the van and drove down the long driveway and found her walking, you know, walking on the same path that she would normally walk. So it seemed like she took it upon herself to say, okay I guess they want me to walk. Maybe she felt like she was left behind. Maybe she was really anxious to go and wanted to go on her own. It was hard to say. Afterwards her dad visited, and he was speaking to her verbally and I just couldn't imagine that she understood the gravity of what had just happened . I think one of these methods with the story connected to pictures to let her know we care and would worry if she left the

house without telling us, might allow her to kind of break down the severity of what happened and how she can help us with keeping her safe.

When asked the question to reflect upon the staff development session they attended regarding its usefulness towards their roles and responsibilities as Direct Support Professionals, all six of the participants in this study provided insightful examples of the teaching strategies they indicated they use which they also recognized as strategies incorporated in the Social Stories™ method (See Table 4.1).

Table 4.1
Strategies recognized by participants derived in Theme 2

Strategy/Technique	Participant referencing their use of the skill
Verbal Prompting	Ava, Jeff, Alfonso, Kelly, Taylor, Nora
Modeling	Ava, Jeff, Alfonso, Kelly, Taylor, Nora
Gesturing	Jeff, Nora
Visual Supports (photos, digital images)	Ava, Jeff, Alfonso, Taylor
Verbal Praise (Reinforcement)	Ava, Jeff Nora
Cues, questions, activating prior knowledge	Alfonso
Nonlinguistic representations Drawing	Taylor
Hands-on learning	Alfonso, Kelly
Role play	Ava, Jeff, Alfonso, Kelly

Research Question 3

How does the experience of the staff development training for creating social stories impact the DSP's perceived ability to meet the requirements of the New York State Core Competencies for Direct Support Professionals? This research question was aimed at understanding the beliefs and perceptions of the DSPs regarding their self-efficacy to meet their professional performance competencies specifically related to individual and group teaching abilities and skills. The following theme emerged from an analysis of transcripts related to DSPs' responses involving the impact of the staff development session on their teaching abilities as indicated in the NYS Core Competencies: *Person Centered Approaches*

Theme 3: Person Centered Approaches

All six of the participants indicated that they were aware of the DSP Core Competencies as part of the process for them to receive their performance evaluations and opportunities for career ladder advancement. All six participants also indicated that they could not remember the competencies by name or "word for word" but knew about the areas in general. At the beginning of the first interview the participants and I reviewed their responses to the questionnaire. The questionnaires provided an opportunity for participants to recollect concepts and understandings that can be discussed and probed further in the interview sessions (Adamson, et al. 2004) An analysis of the questionnaires indicated that four of the six participants listed the construct of *Respect* as their response to the categories of the Core Competencies they believed they were most familiar with. Four of the participants identified they were least familiar with the construct of *Supporting Individuals in the Community*. When asked what they

perceived their strongest DSP Core Competency Skill Area to be, five of six individuals noted the construct of *Developing Relationships* (See Table 4.2).

Further data analysis of the final interview transcripts and written weekly reflections illuminated participants’ philosophical perspectives on how each person they support has different learning attributes. All six participants indicated that they believed the social story strategy could be useful for increasing social skills .

Table 4.2

Responses to Questionnaire Items

Participants	DSP Core Competency Most Familiar With	DSP Core Competency Least Familiar With	My Strongest DSP Core Competency Skill Area
Jeff	Respect	Finding Work	Communication
Kelly	Support Needs	Being in the Community	Knowing what the person Wants/needs
Taylor	Respect Rights	Teaching to Respect Others	Following their safeguards
Alfonso	Showing Respect	Dealing with Co-workers	Building rapport
Nora	Help Them Learn	Learning to make Friends	Compassion
Ava	Teaching Skills	Paid Employment	Treating them as unique individuals
Most Frequent Construct Noted	Respect	Community/ Employment	Developing Relationships

When participants were asked the question regarding how learning to create a literacy-based social skill strategy may impact their professional teaching skills as listed in the core competencies for Direct Support Professionals, three of the six participants

acknowledged obstacles due to learner characteristics. Participants were questioned further and asked to share how they perceived the effects of those obstacles.

During her final interview, Kelly spoke about her reflections after experiencing the staff development session. Kelly noted her interest in developing her skills as a DSP further when she stated, “I am extremely conscious now of each interaction. It makes me want some training in teaching skills and modalities”. She continued to add, “it makes me more interested in progress, in paying attention to every step in the process and what I am trying to achieve when working on a goal.” Kelly described her self-reported strength of knowing what the person (individual supported) wants or needs as a form best practice for DSPs. She identified that each learner is different, and that the DSP has to teach each person in a manner that works best for them (learners). This was evident when Kelly noted the following:

DSPs are the main people that see individuals all the time. We spend the most time with them and we have to get to know and understand what could be beneficial for them. This will help us do something different for each person, because maybe someone has a different attention span or is easily distracted...we would need to find something pertinent to them and their interests.

Along with Kelly, three additional participants mentioned the potential need to adapt the social story method in order to address the abilities of the individual learners. This construct was most clearly noted by Ava when she said, “you know, I've already started trying to finagle how it (social stories) can work with certain people that I'm supporting. You have to meet them where their learning style is”. Nora shared, “they are all at different levels, right? So let's say Frankie (individual supported), he's not going to

sit for any of it. I would have to kind of like follow him around and talk out loud.” In addressing the issue of learner interest Nora shared her ideas on how to alter the form of the social story to make it more appealing to one of the individuals she supports when she described the following:

I had this vision of it being that you take that social story we did in the training on social distancing or washing hands, and you cut it into, let's say, four puzzle pieces and you work with them to put it in the right order. Perhaps, and it might just be pictorial in that instance. If they're not literate, you know, that kind of thing. Then the success, the interaction, the attention and the success of putting it in the right order and then we could read it while they were still happy that they could put it together.

Alfonso expressed his considerations for how he saw social stories being personalized and implemented to address individual needs of the learners when he shared the following:

The attention span of the individual would have to be taken into account when creating a social story. You don't want it to just be something that they passively look at. You want them to be involved in the story. See, you could be teaching all the guys in this house about COVID-19 and not shaking hands, or other things, but you know, you would have to make some of the social stories shorter or even use the tablet for them. Sean (individual supported) will really focus if it's on his tablet but for Wayne, I think something where he can match certain things, you know, like if you can take out a picture, like Velcro™ and after reading the page he could peel off the photo and hold it cause he is really tangible and enjoys lining

things up. We want them to see their involvement in the story more so than us seeing involvement in the story.

Two of the six participants expressed their views on the expectation of DSPs to know how to adapt materials for use with a variety of learner skill sets. Taylor noted, “we are expected to teach to so many different types of people and that can really be difficult”. When probed to expand upon her insights Taylor stated the following:

We have to help people with their job skills, and we get evaluated on the core competencies so we can teach them skills to help them learn, whether they're asking for something and how to request something by sort of pulling on my arm. I'm going to teach them how to request something. So if you don't have those social skills, they may get frustrated because people assume that you know what is going on. So for as many different types of learners there are there are same number of different types of DSPs.

Nora succinctly noted, social stories can be beneficial with photos or just words or combination of both depending on the individual that one is presenting it to. Nora added the following assertion:

I think that's another part of it, is understanding when you're working with someone with a developmental disability, how that kind of plays into when you're teaching them and working with them, especially how you speak with them, that, you know, they use one or two steps at a time, or they may need to get up and dance for a few seconds and then come back to you, you know, it all comes down to being person centered.

Research Question 4

What do DSPs perceive the impact of the staff development training for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy to be on the quality of life for the adult learners with autism or other developmental disabilities that they support? This research question was aimed at understanding the beliefs and perceptions of the DSPs as they reflected upon the staff development session and how the implementation of social stories may impact the quality of life for those adult learners with autism and other developmental disabilities they support. The following theme emerged from an analysis of transcripts related to DSPs' perceptions about effects of the staff development session on the quality of life of individuals supported: *Enhancing Skills to Improve Opportunities*.

Theme 4: Enhancing Skills to Improve Opportunities

Lougen, (2009) explains how the folding in of the historical context, societal struggles or geographical conditions taking place in the lives of participants as they experience the phenomenon under study can contribute to a richer, deeper understanding of their lived experiences. Each aspect of this study was affected by the outbreak of a new type of Coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, that causes the COVID-19 respiratory disease. The materials used for the staff development experience involved social stories themed with ways to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Beyond the materials used for the staff development session, participants were experiencing the conditions of living and working during this global pandemic which involved significant changes to the daily lives of the persons they supported.

On March 7, 2020 New York State's Governor Andrew M. Cuomo declared a state of emergency through Executive Order 202 to respond to the COVID-19 public

health emergency (OPWDD, April 2020). In response to this state of emergency, and to ensure health and safety, OPWDD, in conjunction with the New York State Department of Health began a series of modifications to the service system in place which would last for the duration of the state of emergency, or until revoked by OPWDD. Direct Support Professionals were declared by Governor Cuomo to be *essential employees* and as such were required to report to work, receive health and safety guidance regarding the use of personal protective equipment and provide the continuity of services to the adults living in community-based residential settings (OPWDD, September 2020).

As with much of the country, March 2020 marked the beginning of a rapid series of decisions enacted to protect the public's health and safety, notwithstanding the health and safety of individuals with developmental disabilities. These decisions resulted in significant restrictions in the day to day activities that one might consider quality of life indicators. Day programs were ordered to close, family visits were prohibited, and guidance on the restrictions of community outings including suggestions to limit recreational participation to one location per day were enacted by community-based residential agencies, statewide (OPWDD, August 2020).

The 16 weeks of the data collection phase of this study took place from September 2020 to December 2020. During this time period, the United States was experiencing a new surge in the infections, hospitalizations, and deaths of its citizens as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. This surge would last into the early months of 2021 (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center [JHCRC], 2021)

Although the Summer of 2020 saw some easing in OPWDD restrictions for access to family visitation, there were still many community activities that remained

closed or inaccessible to people who could not successfully wear face masks, socially distance, or demonstrate behaviors to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The acute and long term effects of living in the COVID-19 pandemic has had undeniable influences across the components of this study. By embracing those influences and acknowledging them I hope to capture the truest essence of the participants' lived experience.

Three of the six of the participants indicated in their initial interviews that the idea of having a good quality of life or "enjoying life" as Kelly noted, was more "about staying safe and not catching the virus" during the pandemic. Jeff noted, "it was just awful, Jimmy couldn't go out and see his sister or even go to program, we try to communicate why but I'm sure he is frustrated, we all are". Nora suggested in her first interview that, "I think the agencies should come up with a way to teach the residents how to get use to wearing masks and (Personal Protective Equipment) PPE, there has to be some solutions to that".

When asked in his first interview, what ways did he see himself impacting the quality of life of those individuals he supports, Alfonso shared his concerns that his work as a DSP feels much like reacting to situations and not promoting ways for the people he supports to increase their opinions on the supports they receive. This is evidenced in the following: (Alfonso)

We assist them (individuals supported) with how much they come up short most of the time. That's how it seems. Whatever the action that we're trying to share with them that we think that'll benefit them. A lot of times I'm left with questions and then, you know. We're all guessing as to what really happened. We need a

tool that allows residents to communicate back to us and allows us to have feedback from them, how it's going for them, that would be a way to see what they want to do. We're the only ones giving feedback . When we interact we document. Right. That's the only feedback is documentation. Then maybe there are directives put in, you know, changing the supervision plan or something of that nature, maybe even restrictions. We're reacting. We're not being as proactive as we possibly could be if we had that essential part of communication.

Taylor noted in her first interview that promoting independence requires effort and opportunities to learn. She shared the following:

Most of them (individuals supported) maybe even all of the guys, just want to be more independent. Most of them want to be able to do more. And some of them don't get the chance to do so. Like in our house. I don't even think we're trying to make their lives more livable . Sometimes I don't feel like we're doing that because sometimes it seems like we're really just trying to keep them safe.

All six of the participants in the study indicated in their final interviews that they perceived the experience of the staff development session as having important impacts on improving the quality of life of the individuals they support. Nora described her perceptions that the quality of life for individuals could improve if they could wear masks given the requirements in New York State. Nora noted the following:

The COVID 19 environment we are living in recently means we need those educational tools to manage our life during the corona virus crisis especially in group homes. Tools that will make us go through this crisis and teach the residents we support how to follow protocol and policy to stay safe.

Nora further connected the staff development session as a way for her and other DSPs to receive training to teach social skills in order to support the self-directed interests of the individuals she supports. This was evident when Nora noted the following:

This live zoom meeting staff development session made the learning of coronavirus more interesting and fun in the workplace. I think DSPs need more live zoom learning to be able to put in place all the safety protocol in the group home. You know Shawn wants to go out and into the stores, but he can't because he doesn't keep the mask on. We can teach him now, right?

In responding yes to Nora's question whether she could teach the adults in her program how to wear a mask properly, I further questioned Nora about other ways her experience could affect the quality of life of the individuals she supports. Nora responded with the following:

You know, we can't go back to being the caretakers, DSPs have come a long way in my time, so we can keep trying to teach people skills they want to learn. They are young and want to work and have friends, even go to college so this training on social stories could be used to teach more about what they should do so they can have more fun in life and maybe make money.

Jeff shared in his weekly reflection how the social stories used in the staff development session became very useful to him as a DSP. Jeff noted the following:

Right after our first meeting, our group home had to do a quarantine after a suspicious exposure that took place in the day programs. The materials we discussed and covered were perfect to put them in place during our quarantine. My opinion to keep them safe during this crisis is to teach them how to stay safe.

As DSPs, we try our best to educate but we always need tools and support to reach the goal.

When I asked Jeff in his final interview about any impacts to the quality of life for the individuals he supports he shared the following:

Using these social stories is like teaching independence. That's what it is for me. I think that's really important. I think having that and not being like in that caregiver mode that I think the field was so locked into for a long longtime where they just wanted to take care of them. But it's (Quality of Life) more about not just taking care about them. It's teaching them how to be more independent, helping them be able to attain something that's important to them. So they can do what they want with their lives. I think that's a big thing.

Two of the six participants indicated that Social Stories™ include a rationale for the learner to gain an understanding of the importance of learning what is being presented in the social story. This was evident when Ava indicated the following

This information providing me with insight into thinking about how to help an individual I support to understand why we have to wear masks. I think that has resonated a lot with me because we support individuals that either we just ask them to wear a mask without really having them understand the purpose of it or, you know, this is how we have to do something, but not maybe really helping them understand the purpose behind it. I think that is something that is important in a social story that I never thought to even implement, you know, so I think that's what really resonated, being like, oh, my gosh, you can pretty much use it

for any skill because it's helping them understand and it's broken down into ways that they understand it.

When I asked Ava to elaborate on her insights on the impact to the learner's quality of life she offered the following:

Well, we (DSPs) don't get this type of professional development and that's where you learn how to help improve a person's quality of life, by teaching them more skills. But what I found recently is not everybody is cut out for this job. And you have to have a heart and you have to have a soul. And you have to have respect for the people that we serve. So taking it more specifically if I wanted to learn more about autism and being able to teach positive communication, then if I was able to do a course in that and learn more about that, like webinars if there are any that would give me skills to teach. I guess, the best way to be able to impact the individual's quality of life is to better myself, because if I don't... if you don't expand your knowledge and expand your education within something, then you're going to kind of get stuck in the same way of how you did something. There's always a newer way to do something else. For me, that was always because I always want to learn more. So again, it is taking that knowledge and maybe now using a social story or something else to be able to put it into how we work with the individuals that we support.

Taylor related her insights on how she perceived the impact of using social stories as a way to increase a learner's understanding similar to how she engages in reading in order to learn about topics that interest her. This was evident in the following:

I feel like that's where it made me think about creating social stories it isn't just because someone's having a difficult time and needs to learn how to do a coping skill or, you know, it's typically about maladaptive, you know, inappropriate behaviors. That's usually where we have to teach people not to do things because they're having a difficult time with something. It's not sometimes always about a skill. So I think that it's helped me change the framing of how I see it is that you can kind of use this or maybe make goals. You can use it for a skill that they're learning to help them understand something. I do this all the time. I look up information and read about it and get ideas like when I decided to go back to school for CNA. I don't know how to teach people to read but maybe social stories could help with that.

Three of the six participants discussed the usefulness of the social story strategy to learn skills often needed in seeking and maintaining friendships as well as finding employment opportunities. These concepts were noted by Ava when she recounted her written reflections during her final interview. Ava provided the following:

Employment is such a significant barrier for them (individuals supported) sometimes it's not planned well and if we knew about a specific place of employment that they're going to we could help to prep them. Then they could use the social story, maybe on their phone as a reminder about what to do if someone is talking to them a certain way, or they need to ask for a break. This might help them get or even keep a job. Thinking back it was like mind blowing the fact that it never even crossed my mind to think of it (social story) in that way,

that it could be about skills, because you're always thinking about what difficulty is this individual having now.

Alfonso keyed in on the emotional benefit of learning new skills and how that could impact how a person might measure their own quality of life. This was clearly evident when Alfonso stated the following:

I feel like the value is them being able to understand and then becoming proud of something that they're able to achieve is what I would think of for my own quality of life. So they're learning how to, whether it's to master a skill, to understand how social manners or even how and when to apologize for something...cause that's what helps people keep their relationships. I can see through a social story that the value is that they're going to have that skill, that they can practice and excel at that and then they've been able to do it.

Alfonso would later add before the end of his final interview, “there’s so much more we could be doing, it could be better if all the staff were using these tools and we had more of these staff development trainings”.

Kelly shared her insights about how social stories may have people keep their employment as well as helping people she supports obtain employment when she noted the following:

I knew a person I use to work with who lost his job bagging groceries. It was because he would reach out and get too close to people. So I could see using something like that with him. If COVID ever ends. I think it's great. Let's say Marco (individual supported) doesn't go back to the day program. I think it would be a step up for him if he actually had a real job, right? I mean, I can sit

there and play matching card games with them (individuals supported), but I'm not sure how that's an activity that occupies them with any type of meaning. And I don't know what other teaching activities I could do. So in these sessions that we have (staff development). It's more about furthering education as opposed to keeping them busy.

When asked the question how she perceived the impact of the staff development session on the quality of life of the individuals she supports, Nora identified that when learners develop their social skills they can do more, experience more and have better opportunities to live the life they choose. This was evident when Nora stated the following:

As a DSP worker, we try to make life easier on the individuals especially when it comes to communicating with us. Some of the individuals are nonverbal and don't always understand what we are asking of them; with social stories it could make things a little easier. For instance... one of the individuals doesn't truly understand ..well at least we may not fully understand....you know...what they are trying to communicate....so when something he does, you know, is socially inappropriate which a social story may be useful for him, so he can greet people appropriately and not hug everyone. He could be presented with a scenario which could explain how a particular situation isn't appropriate and be given the appropriate behavior. We need to teach good skills not just tell them to stop doing the wrong thing. He would really like to go to some of these places and take care of animals maybe, he would choose that I think. There are obstacles in everything...there is always something to try to figure out about the people we

support, but ... I think this can be a big help...I think social stories could help many individuals.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Conclusions

This phenomenological study explored the perceptions of Direct Support Professionals who experienced a staff development session on creating a literacy-based social skill strategy. This study yielded several findings that are discussed in this chapter. The conclusions of this study follow the research questions, and the findings are reported in the following key areas (a) Pictures Build Understanding, (b) Recognizing Teaching Techniques, (c) Person Centered Approaches, and (d) Enhancing Skills to Improve Opportunities.

Pictures Build Understanding

Findings indicated that overall that DSPs described the inclusion of photos in social stories as most important to the usefulness of the literacy-based social skill strategy. Although participants specified a variety of reasons for the efficacy of photos to convey meaning in the social stories, the consensus was that pictures would be more likely understood by the learner.

DSPs perceived that pictures, which contain real photos as opposed to stick figure pictures, could be more useful in developing understanding in the adult learner with autism or other developmental disabilities. This finding is similarly consistent with the picture comprehension system employed by Cihak (2006), albeit the later involved children ages seven to nine who were diagnosed with autism and had a history of ineffective verbal skills training. The approach to teaching picture reading utilized by Cihak (2006) incorporated using photos of familiar objects and people in comparison to cartoon like characters and was found to reinforce the concepts that concrete, realistic,

non-abstract text may be a preferred genre for students with autism. DSPs in this study however, equated the use of real photos from the standpoint of age appropriateness given the fact that the learners they were supporting were adults. Additionally, several DSPs in the current study emphasized the use of realistic photos of interest or familiarity as a way to garner the attention of the adult learner. Even though this finding lacks an equivocal reference in the literature it does parallel the premise of Zein et al. (2016) who sought to understand the impact of modifying age level texts by embedding the preferences of the subject in the text in an effort to increase motivation and engagement.

DSPs indicated that in addition to utilizing real photographs in the social story they believed that the specific teaching technique of modeling which was presented as a step in the overall process for implementing Gray's (2014) Social Story™ method during the staff development session of this study, or role playing what was being depicted in the photo may also promote increased understanding of the skill for the learner. This finding is reflected in the literature involving a review of social studies research. Leaf et al. (2012) revealed that the inclusion of role playing or modeling the correct social skill was a factor attributed to the mastery of social skills for subjects receiving a teaching interaction procedure in comparison to receiving a Social Story™ intervention without modeling or role playing.

Among the findings related to the perceptions about the staff development training for creating social stories, I was surprised to hear the strength of emotional responses that applauded the use of age appropriate and familiar photos. It raised several questions for me, regarding adequate access to appropriate teaching materials, or activities in the program. Moreover, it reinforced the theoretical underpinnings of the

adult learning theory principle which would imply that adult learners accumulate a vast array of life experiences that offer them valuable learning resources (Cochran & Brown, 2016; Knowles et al., 2015).

Recognizing Teaching Techniques

Findings illustrated DSPs were more apt to recognize and label their perceptions of the teaching strategies they employed after attending the staff development session than they were at recalling teaching strategies in their first interview, prior to receiving the staff development session. There was a consensus among participants that the staff development session provided them with an awareness of instructional skills they believed they were previously using and as such, this awareness translated into their perceived legitimacy as teaching professionals which they had not otherwise considered. This finding in particular, due to the expressed sentiment of the participants' perceptions of how school teachers and others viewed their work as DSPs, brought into view another tenet of Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory which contends that adult learners have a "deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable" (Knowles et al., 2015, p.65)

Hill (2002) described learning from a social cognitivist perspective as a change in mental processes involving the belief in one's capabilities or self-efficacy. The findings suggest participants perceived a positive experience related to their understanding of their role in teaching adult learners with disabilities. Moreover, the findings suggest that when met with situational demands every person undertakes a self-reflective analysis of their abilities to meet such demands (Bandura, 1997).

Through the use of reflective analysis, participants' self-efficacy in their teaching skills was greatly enhanced, however, it should be noted that participants also engaged in reflective analysis that manifested suggestions to alter materials, adapt the delivery of social stories, and identify potential obstacles to the implementation of the strategy. This finding corresponded closely with the findings related to research question three and the theme of person centered approaches. I offer the potential explanation for the partial similarity in findings for two separate research questions to be rooted in each question's emphasis on the perceived impact of the DSPs experiences related to their teaching skills. Research question two is more general and has yielded the findings identified in the thematic analysis of *Recognizing Teaching Techniques*. Research question three posits the additional perception of the DSPs teaching skills related to meeting the requirements of their professional core competencies. The findings for research question three are encapsulated in the thematic scheme of *Person Centered Approaches* and will incorporate the referenced findings related to adaptations and obstacles to implementation noted above.

Person Centered Approaches

Findings illustrated a consensus among participants' perceptions that the needs and learning styles of the adult learners with disabilities would be an important factor to plan for when considering their abilities to meet the requirements of their professional core competencies. Further findings suggested that participants identified the core competencies as their professional evaluation tool which would measure their success in increasing the skill levels of the adult learners with disabilities that they support. This finding highlights the decades long effort to transform the DSP workforce from a

custodial care mindset to one in which services are identified to promote fuller community inclusion and competitive employment opportunities, known as person centered supports (PCMR, 1996). Additionally, educational plans that are appropriately designed for young adults transitioning from school to adult residential programs require not only knowing what to teach but also an understanding of where and how skills will be taught in order to help students achieve such goals (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Decisions for choosing one teaching strategy over another are influenced not only by the needs of the learner but can be impacted by a teacher's self-efficacy and experiences with professional development (Mahler et.al., 2017).

Further findings indicated that DSPs' perceptions yielded the constructs of modifying and adapting the literacy-based social skill strategy to include reading aloud the written text while learners listened and looked at the photos and incorporating tangible or motivating interests. This finding corresponds with research related to the use of read-alouds and shared reading strategies to promote comprehension in school aged children with autism. Instructional strategies that offered listening to text while teachers read aloud and selecting texts that students found engaging and motivating were used to mitigate obstacles in attention to reading instruction (Williamson et al., 2015).

Additionally, according to the National Autism Center (NAC), "story-based interventions are often used with individuals who have acquired reading comprehension skills but may also be used with individuals with strong listening comprehension skills" (p.69).

Finally, the findings suggest that DSPs perceive their role to meet the needs of each individual learner as part of their responsibility to their professional code of ethics

and core competencies, and adapting instructional methods in an effort to accomplish that pledge demonstrates similarities with teaching strategy selection among their professionally licensed peers. Borko and Shavelson (1990) illustrated that the implementation of instructional strategies to target the identified needs of learners rests solely in the hands of the skilled practitioner and the role of the teacher becomes a critical component in matching instructional needs with what they believe will be the best method to attain the targeted outcomes.

Enhancing Skills to Improve Opportunities

The findings indicated that there was a consensus among the participants that the staff development session provided them with a strategy and an exemplar for teaching social skills related to COVID-19 mitigation skills (wearing a mask, washing hands, social distancing, understanding of the pandemic). The participants equated the benefits of staying healthy and maintaining personal physical and mental health to having a good quality of life. This finding is similar to the factors associated with quality of life indicators that suggest parents or caregivers rate physical and emotional wellbeing factors as elements which define the quality of one's life (Sheldrick, et al., 2012).

Participants also discussed the impact of their experiences with the staff development session by conversely reflecting upon the construct that opportunities which are self-directed and illustrate the pursuits of the individual to achieve desired outcomes would provide the framework for establishing what a quality of life would mean for the individual person. To that end, participants expressed the consensus that many opportunities are not available or accessible to those individuals they support due in part to the level of skill development required to engage in those activities or life events.

Getting married, having friends, finding and keeping employment, living on their own, and going to college are examples of the types of opportunities they envision the individuals they support would want to engage in. Developing the entry level skills to attempt to achieve such goals is where participants indicated that the greatest impact of the staff development session to create a literacy-based social skill strategy would be. Related to this finding is the work of Biggs and Carter (2017) who found that self-determination was positively correlated to perceived quality of life for transition age youth with disabilities. Additionally, Hurlbutt and Chalmers' (2002) study illustrated the perspectives of two adults living with autism who had reflected upon whether they might have kept their jobs had they been shown how to use social stories to assist them in learning social skills. Findings from this study affirm the discussions specific to Hurlbutt and Chalmers (2002) in that DSPs indicated that the use of social stories could positively enhance the learners' skills, thereby helping the learner to obtain and potentially maintain positions of employment.

Findings also included that participants perceived their lack of professional development opportunities as a direct obstacle to their growth and development as teaching professionals which they further believed could influence the quality of life of the individuals they support. This finding holds consistent with research involving the informed opinions of DSPs who want more specific training beyond annual, regulatory trainings that address health and safety in the workplace (Johnson, 2019). Additionally, lack of professional development has landed high on the reasons DSPs leave the workforce (Johnson, 2019) and the high turnover rate that has been continually

experienced has shown there to be an unfavorable impact on the quality of life of individuals receiving services in community-based programs (Freidman, 2018).

Limitations

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to discover Direct Support Professionals' perceptions of a staff development session designed for creating a literacy-based social skills strategy known as social stories or story-based instruction. This study explored the perceived self-efficacy of DSPs to utilize social stories as a teaching tool, to understand their perceptions regarding how the staff development session influenced their skills as teaching professionals, and to what extent the DSPs perceived the impact of the social story strategy to be on adult learners with autism and other developmental disabilities. The six participants in this study and the researcher are employed by a non-profit agency in the Mid-Hudson Region of New York State. Because all of the participants knew the researcher, their responses could have been impacted by this professional relationship. Some participants may have expended more energy in contemplating their responses, possibly in an effort to provide the researcher with what they perceived the researcher wanted to hear. Other participants may have intentionally curtailed their responses because they may have perceived that their responses were being evaluated.

Implications and Recommendations

Research involving DSPs has long since concluded the need to provide professional development for these teaching professionals beyond annual mandated trainings in workplace safety. DSPs have made their voices heard regarding their assertions and requests to provide them with professional development in order to

increase their skills in supporting adults with intellectual disabilities (Friedman, 2018; Hewitt et al., 2008). This research study has responded to that call and as such provided DSPs with an opportunity to experience a staff development session utilizing an evidenced based social skill strategy that has been widely studied among students with autism and other Intellectual Developmental Disabilities (IDDs).

The voices of the DSPs were as clear as they were cautionary. DSPs in this study made evident that they have cultivated an expertise in knowing the human person based not upon what has been explicitly taught to them, but rather by what they have taken upon themselves to learn. In many ways it can be understood best that the adult receiving supports acts much like a mentor for the DSP; through trial and error the two work together to develop a relationship built upon respect and trust. Their collective learning from and with one another takes place not in a classroom but in the day to day settings of the learner's life. This study reinforces what many advocates for persons with disabilities have perhaps known for years, how can the efforts to promote the self-determination and quality of life of the adult learner with autism and other IDDs be separated from efforts to build the capacity of the professionals that support them.

Though the DSP's expressed viewpoints of concern over the areas of their professional competency that directly influences the quality of life of the individuals they support such that has been detailed in the findings of this study, I offer several recommendations for key agents of change.

Staff Development Departments

Staff development departments would benefit by incorporating more course offerings and opportunities involving professional development for DSPs to explore

evidence-based strategies as a means to enhance instructional knowledge and implementation. The participants in this study referred to a number of instructional strategies that may or may not have been consistent with the strategy's method of implementation. The use of least to most prompts was consistently explained by all participants, demonstrating a foundational understanding of the use of the strategy. The methods employed by the agency to develop the skills needed to successfully instruct staff in the system of prompt support should be utilized to continuously improve DSPs' knowledge and use of evidence-based practices.

Additionally, staff development departments supporting DSPs would benefit from developing a means to provide resources to team members supporting learners with IDD. Instructional materials that could be used with the learner to develop their own personal social story for example, should be readily available and accessible in multidimensional formats including downloadable software applications.

Lastly, staff development departments operating at agencies which are regulated to provide mandated training in health and safety, play a pivotal role in understanding the skill levels of the DSPs and their scope of practice. To that end, it would be beneficial to incorporate personalized professional development training plans that not only meet regulatory guidance but aim to craft a professional development plan that will enhance the skills of the DSP by assessing their current skill level and tailoring instructional courses to the individual learner.

Agencies Employing DSPs

State and non-profit (voluntary) agencies providing community-based services to individuals with IDD and employing DSPs, would benefit by developing Professional

Learning Communities (PLCs). A contemporary fixture in education, the PLC provides for a collaborative, results driven system of sharing and learning that can transform the culture of an agency toward a more innovative, collegial, and outcomes driven environment (Szeto et al., 2021). Utilizing PLCs would empower all team members at the organization and provide a forum for ongoing discussions and the development of action plans aimed at ensuring that best practices are implemented, thereby infusing a proactive means to addressing the needs of the adult learners receiving services.

Additionally, agencies and policymakers would benefit from exploring the development of peer mentoring and coaching programs for DSPs. Peer mentoring initiatives can serve to develop a career ladder for DSPs while advancing teaching skills for mentor and mentee alike. It can be a valuable method to reduce staff turnover, build capacity, and increase wages for DSPs (Parker et al., 2021; Michelle, et al., 2017).

Higher Education

The 2017 report on America's Direct Support Workforce Crisis encouraged the U.S. Department of Labor to engage in utilizing community colleges and job centers in an effort to create credentialing programs and career training for DSPs (PCPID, 2017). DSP preparation programs, especially those that offer certificate or credential programs, should ensure that the course work includes opportunities for DSPs to engage in the practice of generating reflective narratives as part of their internship requirements. The internship or practicum experience positions the learner in the real world theater of applying their knowledge and becoming the practitioner. Integral to that experience is the benefit of engaging in reflective practices.

Participants in this study were prompted to answer reflective questions over the course of six to eight weeks post staff development session. Their engagement in the reflective practice provided them with an opportunity to make sense of the events or experiences that were happening to them, while offering me the opportunity to explore their understanding and knowledge. The result was a richer, deeper engagement of the participants in their lived experiences. Far better stated, “the power of narrative not only lies in its ability to provide insight across disciplines for both teachers and students, but also in its ability to provide insight across all other branches of human and natural science” (B. Blake, 2012)

Recommendations for Future Research

Research addressing the effects of evidenced based practices (EBPs) among adult learners with autism and other IDD remains a gap to be filled. Although this study concluded the perceived usefulness in utilizing a literacy-based social skill strategy with adult learners it did not address the measurable outcomes for such an intervention with this population of learners. Further research into the use of social stories and other EBPs such as video modeling, the use of digital platforms for prompting should be conducted among those learners who have transitioned from school based programs into adulthood. More knowledge on how people with disabilities define their own quality of life indicators including experiences with DSPs, family members, and other human service workers will provide a more holistic understanding of the issues and barriers they face.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, equity disparity in educational and employment opportunities for adults living with autism and other IDD should be addressed through research informed initiatives. Research that explores best practices

among community stakeholders to understand the veil of social skills that often impose limits on inherent differences. Research is needed to inform those initiatives that aim to ensure fuller community inclusion, a service system of well-educated and credentialed support professionals, and rich opportunities for adults with autism and other IDD's to live a self-directed life where people can become the best version of themselves.

APPENDIX A

CEO PERMISSION TO RECRUIT STAFF



Request To Contact Direct Support Professionals

September 2020

[REDACTED]
Chief Executive Officer
Redrock Programs, Inc.

Dear [REDACTED]

I am writing to request your permission to contact and recruit Redrock Programs, Inc. employed Direct Support Professionals to participate in a study to understand their perspectives on the usefulness of a staff development session for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy. I am conducting this study along with Dr. Brett Blake, professor and researcher from the School of Education at St. John's University. This study will also serve as part of my doctoral dissertation.

This study involves the selection of six DSP participants who will be requested to participate in 4.5 hours of activities across 12 weeks. The activities include completion of a questionnaire and interview, a reflective summary, a staff development session designed for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy, and a final interview. Because to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent social distancing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), these activities will take place through the use of a telecommunications platform such as Zoom or its equivalent.

All of the above activities will take place during non-working hours. The activities will not take place during any part of the DSPs' paid hourly work schedules, and they will not take place on or with any Redrock Programs, Inc.'s property or equipment. Given that voluntary participation in this study will occur while DSPs are not working their weekly scheduled or non-scheduled hours at Redrock Programs, Inc., they will receive a gift card in the total amount of \$40 for their participation in this study from the researcher. The gift card will be proportionate to participation in the four research activities listed above. Additionally, DSP participants will receive a certificate for participating in the staff development session.

Upon completion of the study, I will provide you with a bound copy of the full research report. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at plaveglia@Redrockprograms.org or [REDACTED]. If you could kindly review and sign the attached acknowledgement/permission form and return to me via email by _____ I would greatly appreciate it. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter and your continued commitment to Redrock Programs, Inc. and to the Direct Support Professional workforce.

Sincerely,

Pattiann LaVeglia
Director of Staff Development
Redrock Programs, Inc.

APPENDIX B

DSP RECRUITMENT LETTER



Direct Support Professional Recruitment Email Script

September 2020

Dear Direct Support Professionals:

Firstly, I would like to thank you for all you are doing within your roles and responsibilities as Direct Support Professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope you are well and have been able to enjoy some relaxation over the Summer. I am writing to request your help in participating in a study to understand the perspectives of Direct Support Professionals on the usefulness of a staff development session for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy. I am conducting this study along with Dr. Brett Blake, professor and researcher from the School of Education at St. John's University. This study will also serve as part of my doctoral dissertation.

If you are a DSP with at least 3 months experience with Redrock Programs, Inc., have received at least one DSP evaluation and work a minimum of 32 hours a week, then you meet the criteria for participating in this study.

If you would like to participate, the following are the activities of the study I will engage in with you:

1. Complete a questionnaire and interview regarding your professional work experience and understanding of DSP Core Competencies.
2. Participate in a staff development session designed for creating a literacy-based social skills strategy known as social narratives or social stories.
3. Create at least 2 written or verbal reflective summaries within 4 weeks of participating in the staff development session.
4. Participate in an interview concerning your perspectives and beliefs on the usefulness of the staff development session.

All of the above activities will take place during non-working hours and not during any part of your paid hourly work schedules with Redrock Programs, Inc. Given that participation in this study will occur while not working your weekly scheduled or non-scheduled hours at Redrock Programs, Inc., you will receive a gift card in the total amount of \$40 for your participation in this study. The gift card will be proportionate to participation in the four research activities listed above. Additionally, you will receive a certificate for participating in the staff development session.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me at plaveglia@Redrockprograms.org. If you are selected as a potential participant I will send you the consent form which contains additional details, information and participant rights.

Thank you for considering this request and your continued commitment to the Direct Support Professional workforce.

Sincerely,

Pattiann LaVeglia
Director of Staff Development
Redrock Programs, Inc.

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER



Direct Support Professional Participant Consent Form

September 2020

Dear Direct Support Professional:

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn more about Direct Support Professionals' perceptions of the usefulness of a staff development session for creating a literacy-based social skill strategy. This study will be conducted by Pattiann LaVeglia, Redrock Programs, Inc. Director of Staff Development, and Dr. Brett Blake, professor and researcher from the School of Education, St. John's University. This study will also serve as part of Pattiann LaVeglia's doctoral dissertation.

By giving your consent to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Complete a questionnaire and interview regarding your professional work experience and understanding of DSP Core Competencies.
2. Participate in a staff development session designed for creating a literacy-based social skills strategy known as social narratives or social stories.
3. Create at least 2 written or verbal reflective summaries within 4 weeks of participating in the staff development session.
4. Participate in an interview concerning your perspectives and beliefs on the usefulness of the staff development session.

Your interviews will be audio or video recorded. You may review these recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed. Participation in this study will involve approximately four and a half hours of time: 1 hour to complete the questionnaire and initial interview, 2 hours for the staff development session, 30 minutes for written or verbal reflective summaries and 1 hour for the second interview. The questionnaire and first interview will occur in September 2020. The staff development session will occur in October of 2020. The reflective reports will occur after the staff development session but not greater than 4 weeks after participating in the session. The final interview will take place approximately 30 days after receiving the staff development session.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research. All interviews and the staff development session will be held using computer video conferencing programs such as Zoom or its equivalent to ensure your health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All interviews, completion of questionnaires, written or verbal reflections, and participation in the staff development session will take place during non-working hours and not during any part of your paid hourly work schedules with Redrock Programs, Inc. Given that participation in this study will occur while not working your weekly scheduled or non-scheduled hours at Redrock Programs, Inc., you will receive a gift card in the total amount of \$40 for your participation in this study. The gift card will be proportionate to participation in the four research activities listed above. Additionally, you will receive a certificate for participating in the staff development session.

Aside from receiving the certificate of participation and the \$40 gift card, your participation in this research will help us better understand the perceptions, beliefs, and thoughts of Direct Support Professionals. You will be contributing to a better understanding of how staff development sessions could be developed and key contextual factors for shaping the manner in which DSPs are provided with professional development opportunities that may assist them in meeting the skill areas of the DSP Core Competencies.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by using codes and aliases to refer to participants, as well as keeping consent forms separate from data to make sure that participants' names and identity will not become known or linked with any information they have provided. Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. You also have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer. Nonparticipation or withdrawal will not affect your professional evaluations or standing.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear, that you do not understand, that you have questions about, or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Pattiann LaVeglia at [REDACTED] or email at plaveglia@Redrockprograms.org. You can also contact the faculty sponsor, Dr. Brett Blake, at [REDACTED] or email at [REDACTED].

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chairperson, digiuser@stjohns.edu, 718-990-1955 or 718-990-1440. You will be given a copy of this participant consent form to keep.

Permission to Participate

I have read and understood the information describe above and give consent to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Direct Support Professional

Signature of Direct Support Professional

Date

APPENDIX D
QUESTIONNAIRE



Questionnaire for Direct Support Professional Study Participants

Demographic and Background Information

1.) What is the highest level of education you have received? Circle one.

High School or equivalent

Some college credit

Associate degree

Bachelor's degree or higher

2.) What is your level of Direct Support experience? Circle one.

6 months to 1 year

1-2 years

2-5 years

5-10 years

10+ years

3.) What are the number of hours that you have participated in staff

development activities during the previous year? Annual mandatory training

is not to be considered staff development. Answer with number of hours in

the blanks below.

_____ Number of hours during work hours

_____ Number of hours outside of your work schedule

4.) When was the last performance evaluation as a DSP you received? Circle one.

Within the last 3 months

More than 6 months ago

More than one year ago

5.) What are 3 skill areas of the DSP Core Competencies that you are most familiar with? A general name for the competency topic is acceptable.

(a) _____ (b) _____ (c) _____

6.) What would you consider to be your two strongest skill areas as a Direct Support Professional?

(a) _____

(b) _____

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Direct Support Professional Participant Interview Protocol

Welcome and introduction.

Verbally restate the information in the informed consent form.

Explain recording procedure and reviewing of data.

Introduce the purpose of the study.

Opening: Please tell me about your experiences as a Direct Support Professional, the length of time in the position, what you enjoy about the profession.

Follow interview topics listed below by using probing questions as needed.

1. In your opinion what qualities should a Direct Support Professional have?
2. Tell me about your learning experiences (staff development) as a Direct Support Professional?
3. How important do you think it is for DSPs to receive staff development and why?
4. How did you view the staff development session you attended on its usefulness towards your roles and responsibilities as a Direct Support Professional?
5. How do you view your ability to create literacy-based social skill strategies since attending the staff development session?
6. What do you believe about whether your participation in the staff development session will have an impact on your professional teaching skills as listed in the core competencies for Direct Support Professionals?
7. What value do you believe there is for learners who may engage in reading or being read a literacy-based social skill strategy?
8. What aspects of this staff development session that you participated in would you like to see occur differently and why?
9. Are there any other perceptions or opinions that you have regarding your experience(s) of having attended this staff development session?

APPENDIX F

WEEKLY REFLECTION PROMPT



Instructions to Direct Support Professional Participants for Weekly Reflections

Part 1

Think about what you learned during the staff development session on creating a literacy-based social skill strategy (social stories). Jot down your thoughts and ideas related to the following questions.

1. How has participating in the staff development session affected your perceptions and beliefs about your role as a Direct Support Professional?
2. What do you think you might do with this information?
3. What happened this week that reminded you of the information in the staff development workshop?

Adapted from: Moussa-Inaty, J. (2015). Reflective writing through the use of guiding questions. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 27(1), 104-113.

Instructions to Direct Support Professionals for Weekly Reflections



Part 2

Think about what you learned during the staff development session on creating a literacy-based social skill strategy (social stories). Jot down your thoughts and ideas related to the following questions.

1. What do you recall from the information presented in the staff development session?
2. What, if any, are ways that information could be beneficial or useful?
3. What might some obstacles be?
4. At this point in time, if you had a chance to make a change(s) regarding how or what information was presented in the staff development session, what would you change?

Adapted from: Moussa-Inaty, J. (2015). Reflective writing through the use of guiding questions. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 27(1), 104-113.

APPENDIX G

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL



Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Jul 17, 2020 1:37 PM EDT

PI: Pattiann LaVeglia
CO-PI: Brett Blake
Education Specialties

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2021-30** *Staff Development for Direct Support Professionals: Perspectives on the Usefulness of a Literacy Based Social Skill Strategy*

Dear Pattiann LaVeglia:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *Staff Development for Direct Support Professionals: Perspectives on the Usefulness of a Literacy Based Social Skill Strategy*. The approval is effective from July 17, 2020 through July 16, 2021

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 4. Collection of data through noninvasive procedures (not involving general anesthesia or sedation) routinely employed in clinical practice, excluding procedures involving x-rays or microwaves. Where medical devices are employed, they must be cleared/approved for marketing. (Studies intended to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of the medical device are not generally eligible for expedited review, including studies of cleared medical devices for new indications.)

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

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