LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
School of Behavioral Health
in conjunction with the
Department of Counseling and Family Sciences

An Evaluation of Transitional Outcomes for STAR Preschool Graduates

by

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A Project submitted in partial satisfaction of
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Doctor of Marital and Family Therapy

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RESULTS

Introduction to Results

Co-Principal Investigator Danielle Clair conducted an evaluation, entitled An Evaluation of Transitional Outcomes for STAR Preschool Graduates, in partnership with Principal Investigator Dr. Douglas Huenergardt between 12/18/17-06/10/18. The Co-Principal Investigator reviewed student documents in the form of IEP documents and later parents of program eligible students and IEP Specialists who oversee the IEP documents were contacted for a 1 hour follow up meeting conducted by the Co-Principal Investigator. The purpose of the evaluation was to review the sustainable effects of the STAR program for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The evaluation identified current academic and behavioral outcomes documented within IEPs which address the challenges and individual needs of STAR graduates in school settings in which the STAR program is not implemented. The findings are indicative of how schools that do not implement later versions of the STAR program reinforce current best practices for students with ASD.

The purpose of the evaluation is to report how progress toward current annual goal(s) is measured to ensure outcomes received upon transitioning from the STAR program have been sustained. It is also important to state that there are observable instances in which STAR goal(s) were not met by the STAR graduation period. Thus making those unmet STAR goal(s) eligible to be characterized as an educational and behavioral need(s) in the IEP. Such changes are required to be modified in order to fit criteria for ESE (exceptional student education) documentation (IDEA, 2004). The following themes identified among the responses: During the IEP follow up meeting, parents reported feeling satisfactory with child’s current academic and behavioral progress and the style in which previous outcomes have been sustained. ESE Specialists expressed that having documentation of outcomes from the STAR program were effective in sustaining the child’s outcomes and/or in modifying unmet STAR goals post transition.
Setting

According to Broward County Public K-5 elementary schools enrollment and student assignment data the school board serves a total number of 96,374 of students, which includes an enrollment of 34,822 ESE students (Broward County Public Schools, 2017). The current enrollment of ASD students in Broward County Public Schools is over 4,800 or about 14% of the total Students with Disabilities population. These numbers continue to grow each year in proportion to the world wide ratio of 1 in every 66 individuals (Broward County Public Schools, n.d). Each public elementary school selected for the evaluation was deemed to be the most appropriate choices to obtain in-depth information about the transitional experiences of STAR graduates. Additionally, each school has a special services staff, which includes an ESE specialist, support facilitators, speech and language therapists, para professionals, occupational therapists, physical therapists and school psychologists. The number of providers per school is based primarily upon the population of special needs students and among these are students with ASD in each respective school.

Observable Differences in Documentation Between General Education and Special-Cluster Program Placements

The discussion to follow will include some observable differences documented during the evaluation of STAR students performance based upon classroom placement. The evaluator did not propose to present comparative data, however, a critical distinguishable feature found within each student’s IEP highlighted whether the STAR student was enrolled in a general education or special\cluster program classroom. The evaluator did not limit the evaluation to a review of either or placement feature, both will be presented in the discussion of findings. The research conducted by Roberts, Keane, and Clark (2008) echoed past findings that stated there does not appear to be any comparative studies of inclusive versus specialist educational placements for children with ASD (Handleman, Harris. & Martins. 2005). During the IEP follow up meeting ESE specialists also reported
that comparative data remains to be an untouched area of observation. The specific question of “Do you think the educational assistance being provided to the child is effective?” was used in the IEP follow up meeting with ESE Specialists to highlight their concerns in respect to the aforementioned statements regarding comparative studies. Most ESE Specialists argued in favor of general education classrooms being effective for the sustainability of outcomes as students.

- “The setting provides sufficient sensory stimulation for high functioning STAR graduates with ASD.”
- “Effectiveness is shown in how our general education classrooms allow STAR graduates and other students with ASD access to the curriculum and it also gives students the opportunity to challenge the diagnostic criteria of social reciprocity through constant peer interaction.”

Other ESE specialists argued in favor of special\cluster program classrooms being effective for the sustainability of outcomes for STAR graduates.

- “Most general education classrooms are not diagnostically appropriate to both assist and help students cope with students’ social, communicative, and intellectual needs”
- “Special\cluster programs are effective in sustaining outcomes for students because they promote a flexible method. We have a simultaneous goal of moving students along a continuum, all while gently pushing the general education agenda and sensitively meeting each students needs.”

This evaluation was designed to report upon how public schools have facilitated the transition of STAR students into both special\cluster program and general education classrooms. The findings include both placement features and most importantly how outcomes have been sustained in spite of classroom placements. Features of both classroom placements will be included in the findings in order to guide the reader in finding value in the unexpected circumstance of the observable differences of placement in student IEP documents. Additionally, such differences will be discussed to show how placements did not impact the public schools ability to sustain STAR graduates previous outcomes as they were introduced to new plans for goal(s) attainment.
Description of General Education Student Placement

Students with ASD placed in general education classrooms exhibit different symptoms and require specific accommodations in the general education classroom that both sustain outcomes received in the STAR program while also harvesting present level outcomes toward goal(s) attainment. The best practices used in general education classrooms that mission upon inclusion and fostering student accommodations. The Florida Department of Education (2012) requires that all students be individually examined and then an eligibility meeting with parents and staff takes place after the individual examination, for parents to receive results that explains ESE qualification. The results of such evaluation are based upon student’s abilities and potential for placement into general education classrooms. Two laws are used in support of student placement in classrooms, notably Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2001). IDEA (2004) has been a long-standing advocate for change in the educational services of students with disabilities. Additionally, the implementation of the federal law, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) was governed to place a continued effort to bring about educational changes for students with exceptional needs. With respect to the findings of this evaluation, it has been found that public schools adhere to both IDEA and NCLB to measure goal(s) attainment and to ensure that previously attained goal are sustained. Consequently, due to the similar missions of IDEA and NCLB both require public schools that promote general education to adapt their instructional materials to accommodate the unique needs recorded in the IEP of each student with a disability pertinent to Autism (Karger, 2005; Simpson, de-Boer-Ott, & Smith-Myles, 2003; Wagner, 2002). As a result of the inconstancy of this specific disability, students with ASD need modifications and/or accommodations to effectively connect to the general curriculum, therefore it is essential that each modification and/or accommodation is highlighted in the IEP document (IDEA, 2004).

IEP documents contain a heading that reads “The impact of the disability on child’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum” (IDEA 2004). So it is understood that students whether enrolled
in general education classrooms or cluster classrooms, experience challenges and each challenge is reflected differently. The impact of each child’s disability is related to the exposure to academic or behavioral curriculum. It is said that these challenges can lead to levels of stress, anxiety and depression that are much higher than for other students and up to 72% of students on the autism spectrum have additional mental health needs (Saggers, 2016). While students with ASD have comorbid conditions, consistently applying accommodations is helpful in general education classrooms since this method of instruction relies heavily upon a student’s ability to interact and communicate effectively. Such applications, will reduce what research has found within general education classrooms to intensify incidents of stress, anxiety, and depression in mainstreamed students with ASD. Saggers (2016) also presented archived findings that students with ASD are four times more likely than their peers to require additional learning and social support aids. In the evaluators attempt to provide a yardstick between what was found in Mandell, Walrath, Manteuffel, Sgro, and Pinto-Martin, (2005), and the evaluation of IEPs for this project, it is evident that service demands as the population of students with ASD has continued to grow. So, the data collected for this evaluation presents how general education methods in public schools have steadily worked to broaden and reshape their documented efforts of meeting the needs of students.

**Description of Special-Cluster Program Student Placement**

Special programs and cluster programs are terms used interchangeably as a means for providing educational and behavioral curriculum to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in public schools without implication to their existing competency levels, and with potential to raise goal(s) attainment for each student. As with general education classroom placement procedure, all students are purposely placed by examination into special program classrooms based on their abilities and potential (The Florida Department of Education, 2012). Students are then grouped into a mixed diagnostic ability classroom with an ESE teacher who are trained to differentiate between student’s academic and behavioral abilities. To ensure that students qualify for appropriate instruction to sustain outcomes
received from the STAR program, it has been found through the initial evaluation process that schools
cluster students according to environmental incidents that were recorded in previous academic settings
that interfered with the students’ ability to academically or behaviorally thrive. The evaluation
encouraged the evaluator to understand the initial transitional steps STAR graduates take in order to
comfortably acclimate to public schools that do not implement secondary STAR academic and
behavioral curricula. In summation, The Florida Department of Education (2012) uses the evaluation
process to collect information about the STAR graduate’s learning needs, strengths, and interests, while
the eligibility determination process serves to identify which classroom setting will work best to sustain
those needs accrued from the STAR program. Both transitional means are used to determine whether
STAR students are placed in general education classrooms or cluster program classrooms. While
students in general education classrooms require less support services, students with ASD in cluster
programs general classrooms have been observed to require an administration of a variation of
reinforcers in order to sustain STAR outcomes and reach further goal(s) attainment.

The Evaluation of IEP Documents

Summary of Progress for Special-Cluster Program Students

Students are observed during an annual 12-month period. The data collected during this time
identified the reformulation and/or modifications of goal(s) that needed to be made by the following IEP
distribution and reevaluation date. However, in the event records show that the student reached goal
attainment midway, an interim IEP would have been held to reformulate and/or modify goal(s) by the
following IEP distribution and reevaluation date. *Please Refer to Appendix J for Curriculum Checklist
for both Special-Cluster and General Education classroom placements. Refer to Appendix K for IEP
Domains Table, which illustrates the documentation of individual student goals across IEP domains.
Special-Cluster Program Student A

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires that students with disabilities be educated in the environment to the maximum in which their academic and behavioral needs will be met. The IEP committee has determined the special/cluster program placement for Student A. This restrictive setting has ensured goal attainment of new goals and previous goals carried over from the STAR program were carefully monitored and documented. The combination of goals in Student A’s total education plan were not only formulated as a means for the student to adjust to the special program curriculum, but also as a legitimate educational interest. With that being said, within the range of progress, Student A has attained 59% minimal progress across all domains in the special/cluster program classroom.

Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student A’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD student A had difficulties demonstrating reading readiness, quantitative math and writing skills. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to improve student A’s reading readiness, writing and math skills. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal. While in the subject areas of word analysis, the student is able to recite the alphabet by rote, assistance is needed both with and without a visual cue. Similarly in the area of math, the student can match and write numbers with some assistance.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

The impact of the disability on Student A’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD Student A had difficulties complying with adult direction and requests. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to improve the student A’s ability to comply to adult direction and requests. This goal was
also highlighted as an unmet STAR goal. While the student has achieved outcomes related to following a visual schedule without assistance, the student continues to have difficulty accepting correction from adults.

Domain: Independent Functioning

The impact of the disability on Student A’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD Student A is having difficulties transitioning throughout the school campus. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to improve the student A’s independent functioning skills. This educational need was enlisted as a new outcome.

Domain: Communication

The impact of the disability on Student A’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD Student A has difficulty describing pictures of objects and producing speech sounds clearly. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to improve the student A’s verbal expression skills. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal. The student follows one-step commands consistently and two step commands inconsistently. Student A demonstrates an understanding of common nouns, but has difficulty with understanding action words, descriptor words, or other parts of speech.

Special-Cluster Program Student B

It was determined by the IEP committee in the development of the IEP upon transitioning, that goals could not be met in a general education classroom. Therefore, student B was placed in a special/cluster program classroom, with supports, to benefit from the curriculum. Within the range of progress, Student B has attained 59% minimal progress across all domains in the special/cluster program classroom.
Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student B’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD and language impairment limits the student’s ability with on grade curriculum. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to improve student B’s participation in large groups. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal. It is reported that 30 percent of the time when Student B transitions to an instructional activity, the student has a tendency to fade out and the eyes will focus on an area above the direct line of vision, and requires verbal and partial physical prompting to in order to attend. Past documentation states that when signaled to transition more often than not the student required physical assistance and close proximity to transition.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

The impact of the disability on Student B’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD when upset or frustrated student B has difficulty communicating needs. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to improve student B’s communication skills. This educational need was listed as a new outcome.

Domain: Independent Functioning

The impact of the disability on Student B’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD student B has difficulty transitioning to non-preferred activities. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to improve student B’s ability to follow verbal directions/stimuli in order to transition. This educational need was enlisted as a new outcome.
Domain: Communication

The impact of the disability on Student B’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD student B has difficulty transitioning between non-preferred activities requiring physical and verbal prompts to engage him. Student B disengages from a lesson inconsistently and often unexpectedly. These behaviors impact the student’s ability to learn in all settings as well as to retain information or present it to others. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase the student’s receptive and expressive language in all settings. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal. Speech is provided with daily integrated interventions and assistance to achieve related communication goals.

Special-Cluster Program Student C

It was determined by the IEP committee in the development of the IEP upon transitioning, that communicative domains could be met by being pulled into general education classroom monthly, per consultation and collaboration between teachers to address/plan interventions for the students needs. However, the student was predominately placed in a special/cluster program classroom, with supports, to meet other domains and benefit from the curriculum. Within the range of progress, Student C has attained 59% minimal progress across all domains in the special/cluster program classroom.

Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student C’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty with reading comprehension and categorizing shapes by attributes. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase student C’s ability to comprehend reading materials and math skills. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as such tasks were non-preferred activity and while documentation has shown improvement with teacher guidance, both remain to be un-preferred activities.
Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

Based on teacher observation and behavioral incidences recorded in previous STAR IEP, Student C is very active and highly distracted. The impact of the disability on Student C’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty keeping personal space with peers when in unstructured environments. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase student C’s ability to use personal space strategies with peers appropriately. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student C enjoyed attention from peers and adults and still requires redirection during the day to follow social/class rules (i.e. safe hands/feet, use kind words, listen to directions, stay in areas assigned).

Domain: Independent Functioning

The impact of the disability on Student C’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD student C has difficulty organizing workspace before starting activities. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to increase student C’s ability to start activity with needed materials. This educational need was enlisted as a new outcome, as the student has been observed to play with instructional materials when performing a non-preferred activity to avoid the task. As a result the student is unable to complete the task because of the time it takes to locate materials and organize workspace and often leads to need for assistance in locating items.

Domain: Communication

The impact of the disability on Student C’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD and language impairment student C has difficulty with reading fluency, which impacts reading comprehension. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue to improve student C’s reading
fluency in order to access the curriculum in the educational environment. This educational need was enlisted as a new outcome, while the student has no challenges with listening comprehension his reading fluency is compromised due to the impact of his language impairment.

Special-Cluster Program Student D

The IEP committee determined, that goals could not be met in a general education classroom. Therefore, student D was placed in a special/cluster program classroom, with supports, to benefit from the curriculum. While enrolled in the special cluster classroom, Student D was reported to have attained 79% moderate progress in curriculum instruction and communication, while making 59% minimal progress in the domain areas of social emotional behavior and independent functioning.

Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student D’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty with reading, math, and writing skills. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve reading, math, and writing skills. This educational need was enlisted as a new outcome, while for example, in the area of reading Student D’s reading is on grade level, however based upon IEP data collected, the student is still developing the ability to find details in passages of text read. Another area that continues to be worked on is reading with the understanding that when the student is responding to questions, guidance is required to aid the student in looking for evidence in the text to respond correctly.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

Based on classroom teacher observation and data recorded in previous STAR IEP, Student D had a difficult time interacting with peers. The impact of the disability on Student D’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the current IEP reads that this goal is remains
in progress as the student now has difficulty expressing thoughts when feeling upset and when both talking to peers and adults. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase student D’s ability to express thoughts when upset and to increase ability to speak with peers and adults. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as the teacher documented that while Student D has preferred peers to talk with or walk with during transitions, the student will emulate the preferred peers inappropriate language and/or behaviors. Also, when upset the student goes under desk if unable to receive what is desired.

Domain: Independent Functioning

The impact of the disability on Student D’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty completing writing tasks and completing work accurately. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve student D’s writing skills to improve accuracy of the work the student has completed. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student D has had a tendency to complete work with minimal effort, in search of playtime as opposed to completing quality work while utilizing skills taught to complete the tasks with accuracy.

Domain: Communication

The impact of the disability on Student D’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD and language impairment the student has difficulty providing definitions for multiple meaning words, using context clues to determine the meaning of new vocabulary words, using complete sentences to correctly sequence the steps to an event/activity. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve ability to sequence events, use context clues and to provide definitions for multiple meaning words. This educational need was enlisted as a new outcome based on informal curriculum measures for language skills. The student was reported to struggle with grade level curriculum questions, while able to provide
opinions on questions asked, the student was unable to support answers logically. Areas of strength include using simple sentences and describing nouns, however prefix and context clues usage is a reported challenge.

Special-Cluster Program Student E

In order for student E to accomplish the goals and objectives of the IEP, it was determined by the IEP committee that increasing speech intelligibility could be met by pulling the student into a general education classroom monthly, per consultation between teachers to address/plan interventions for the student's needs. However, the student E was predominately placed in a special/cluster program classroom, with supports, to meet other domains and benefit from the curriculum. Student E made 79% moderate progress in curriculum instruction, independent functioning, and communication, while making 90% substantial progress in social emotional behavior domain in the special cluster classroom.

Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student E’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty in writing. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve writing skills. This educational need was listed as a new outcome. In the area of writing, Student E is one grade level below current grade level. It is reported that Student E can spell simple words and write simple sentences. The student is developing the ability to write a simple story with a beginning, middle, and end. With guidance the student is able to use pre-writing techniques to write a simple paragraph with main idea sentence and details.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

There is no impact of the disability on Student E’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum as the student has been described as charming and chooses the appropriate behavior and
demonstrates age-appropriate social skills. Teacher observations and checklists reveal that the student also makes friends easily, respects authority, and accepts responsibility for actions. There was no priority educational need at the time of the formulation of this IEP.

Domain: Independent Functioning

The impact of the disability on Student E’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty with staying on task. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase time on tasks. This educational need was listed as a new outcome. While student E has been reported to follow classroom routine and complete work independently, the student needs prompting to remain on task and requires extended time to complete tasks. This skill is being practiced daily and has improved since the beginning of the school year.

Domain: Communication

Based on classroom teacher observation and data recorded in previous STAR IEP, Student E required supports to produce target sounds within structured activities. The student’s extensive vocabulary and attempts to initiate and carry conversations with peers and adults has sustained itself since transition as the student is currently reported to continue to initiate conversation with adults and peers and uses age appropriate vocabulary. Speech Language reports state that the student has difficulty in the area of producing spontaneous speech. The impact of the disability on Student E’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD and speech impairment the current IEP reads that this goal as an unmet STAR goal and has since remained in progress. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase student D’s speech intelligibility.

Table 3. Special-Cluster Program Student Data Sets
Table 4. Special-Cluster Students Progress Monitoring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Curriculum and Instruction</th>
<th>Social Emotional Behavior</th>
<th>Independent Functioning</th>
<th>Communication</th>
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</thead>
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<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage Substantial Progress</td>
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<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</table>

Summary of Progress for General Education Students

Students are observed during an annual 12-month period. The data collected during this time identified the reformulation and/or modifications of goal(s) that needed to be made by the following IEP distribution and reevaluation date. However, in the event records show that the student reached goal attainment midway, an interim IEP would have been held to reformulate and/or modify goal(s) by the following IEP distribution and reevaluation date. *Please Refer to Appendix J for Curriculum Checklist
for both Special-Cluster and General Education classroom placements. Refer to Appendix K for IEP Domains Table, which illustrates the documentation of individual student goals across IEP domains.

General Education Student F

It was determined by the IEP committee in the development of the IEP upon transitioning, that educational needs specific to math and language arts could be met by being pulled into special/cluster program classroom, per consultation and collaboration between teachers to address/plan interventions for the students needs. However, the student was predominately placed in a general education classroom, with supports, to meet other domains and benefit from the curriculum. Student F made 79% moderate progress in curriculum instruction and independent functioning. The student also made 90% substantial progress in the domain areas of social emotional behavior and communication in the general education classroom.

Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student F’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty math and writing. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve student F’s ability to solve single step word problems and to increase writing skills. This educational need was listed as a new outcome, as the student transitioned with no priority educational needs relating to curriculum and instruction.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

Based on teacher observation and behavioral incidences recorded, Student F usually gets along well with peers and makes friends easily. The impact of the disability on Student F’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty responding to
authority. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the
duration of the IEP is/are is to improve student F’s responses to authority when being redirected. This
educational need was listed as a new outcome. While the student sometimes responds to redirection
appropriately and accepts responsibility for actions, it has been observed that the student has difficulty
going along with adults and respecting authority.

Domain: Independent Functioning

According to teacher observation and checklists, Student F completes course work and
homework independently. The student has been reported to follow classroom routines and remain on
task, while requiring minimum redirection. The student also infrequently needs concepts explained more
than once and does not require extended time for some tasks. There is no impact of the disability on
Student F’s involvement in the general curriculum and there is no priority educational need at this time.

Domain: Communication

The impact of the disability on Student F’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum
states that due to ASD the student has difficulty with social language skills. Based on the educational
impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to continue
to improve student F’s social language skills. This educational need was listed as a new outcome.
Teacher observation states student F initiates conversation and is able to maintain a topic conversation.
The student uses social greetings and uses appropriate eye contact, however, has difficulty using
appropriate physical space boundaries, interrupting appropriately, and giving sufficient information for
listener comprehension. It is said that the student has made progress toward previous goals of modeling
listening behavior and responding appropriately to adult directions.

General Education Student G
The IEP committee determined that educational needs specific to language could be met by being pulled into special/cluster program classroom, per consultation and collaboration between teachers to address/plan interventions for the students needs. However, the student was predominately placed in a general education classroom, with supports, to meet other domains and benefit from the curriculum. Progress varied across domains as 90% substantial progress was made in curriculum instruction and independent functioning. The student G also made 79% moderate progress in social emotional behavior and made 59% minimal progress in communication in the general education classroom.

Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

According to teacher observation and reports, in the area of reading, student G is working on grade level, in the area of writing the student is able to write their first and last name and uses pre writing techniques when writing simple sentences. In the area of math the student is on grade level and is working on how to tell time. There is no impact of the disability on Student G’s involvement in the general curriculum and there is no priority educational need at this time.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

The impact of the disability on Student G’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty interacting with peers. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve student G’s interaction skills. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student G was previously reported to struggle in initiating and sustaining with peers as there was an observed preference to play alone. Based on teacher checklists, it is reported in the IEP that Student G has improved in the ability to get along with others and makes friends easily, however, the student prefers to play alone rather than engage peers.

Domain: Independent Functioning
Based on teacher checklist, Student G completes work independently, follows classroom routine, and stays on task with prompting. The student completes homework and can follow 1-2 step directions. Sometimes, the student needs directions repeated or skills explained more than once. The student does not require extended time for tasks. There is no impact of the disability on Student G’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum and there is no priority educational need at this time.

Domain: Communication

The impact of the disability on Student G’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty communicating with adults. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase student G’s receptive and expressive language skills. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student G was previously reported to struggle in initiating and sustaining with peers as there was an observed preference to play alone. The teacher reports that Student G has difficulty explaining upset feelings during moments of frustration. Though it has been documented that the student has shown fewer tantrums and frustration in the therapy setting, and is sometimes able to verbally express frustration in utterances of 5 words or more.

General Education Student H

The IEP committee determined that educational needs specific to language could be met by being pulled into special/cluster program classroom, per consultation and collaboration between teachers to address/plan interventions for the students needs. However, the student was predominately placed in a general education classroom, with supports, to meet other domains and benefit from the curriculum. Student H progress varied across all domains. 90% Substantial progress was made in independent functioning, 79% moderate progress in social emotional behavior, while 59% minimal progress was made in communication and curriculum instruction in the general education classroom.
Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student H’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty retelling the main events of a story. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase student H’s ability to retell the main events of a story. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student G was both previously and at the formulation date of this IEP to be reported to require prompts in retelling the main events of a story, answer basic questions about a story, and sequence events.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

The impact of the disability on Student H’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty initiating conversations with peers. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve student H’s ability to interact with peers. This educational need was listed as a new outcome, as during instructional activities the student gets along will with adults, and interacts with peers while choosing appropriate behaviors, however, during non-instructional activities the student prefers to play alone.

Domain: Independent Functioning

The teacher reports that Student H continues to do well functioning independently since transitioning. The student is able to complete work independently and follow classroom routine. Sometimes the student needs directions repeated, concepts and skills explained more than once, and extended time to complete certain tasks. The student manipulates classroom materials well and all motor skills are functional for classroom tasks. There is no impact of the disability on Student H’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum and there is no priority educational need at this time.
Domain: Communication

The impact of the disability on Student H’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty answering wh- questions and describing items using at least 3 characteristics. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/is to improve student H’s expressive and receptive communication skills. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student H was both previously and at the formulation date of this IEP to be reported to require prompts to convey wants and needs appropriately. A modified goal from STAR to correctly answer WHO, WHAT, WHERE, and WHEN questions with verbal and visual prompting.

General Education Student I

It was found that educational needs specific to reading, math, and language could be met by being pulled into special/cluster program classroom, per consultation and collaboration between teachers to address/plan interventions for the students needs. However, the student was placed in a general education classroom, with supports, to meet other domains and benefit from the curriculum. Student I made 79% moderate progress in curriculum and instruction and independent functioning. The student also made 59% minimal progress in the domain of communication and social emotional behavior in the general education classroom.

Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student I’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty in reading and math. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve student H’s reading and math skills. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student I was both previously and at the formulation date of this IEP, reported to have difficulty using assistive technology device with consistent accuracy. The student is working on spelling consonant-vowel-consonant words,
with full assistance. The student also is able to use the Smart Board with physical, verbal, and gestural prompts and is able to independently use the device when the student is requesting a reinforcer.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

The impact of the disability on Student I’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty with appropriate skills. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve student I’s social skills and turn taking ability. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student I was both previously and at the formulation date of this IEP, reported to be most compliant with a preferred adult. When an adult is not redirect student I, the student does not typically stay seated and does not remain on task. The student will then leave seat to be in the vicinity of the preferred adult. Student I will parallel play with other students but does not initiate interaction while in classroom, though other student have initiated play, student I will not reciprocate.

Domain: Independent Functioning

Per teacher documentation, Student I is reported to be functioning independently and follows classroom routines with moderate prompting. However, the student does require extended time for some tasks. There is no impact of the disability on Student I’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum and there is no priority educational need at this time.

Domain: Communication

The impact of the disability on Student I’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty selecting the intended icons on using assistive technology device, categorizing. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to improve student H’s receptive and expressive language skills. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student I was both previously and at the formulation date of this IEP, reported to have difficulty using assistive technology device with
consistent accuracy within this domain and the domain of curriculum and instruction. Student I’s lack of motivation in speech therapy impacts the ability to consistently answer questions correctly. The student is reported to correctly answer a question with minimal cueing one day, and the next day the student is unable to complete the task without maximum prompts.

General Education Student J

Student J’s educational needs specific to language and specialized visual input could be met by being pulled into special/cluster program classroom, per consultation and collaboration between teachers to address/plan interventions for the students needs. However, the student was placed in a general education classroom, with supports, to meet other domains and benefit from the curriculum. Student J made 79% moderate progress in curriculum and instruction and independent functioning. The student also made 90% substantial progress in the domain of communication and social emotional behavior in the general education classroom.

Domain: Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of the disability on Student J’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has difficulty in the area of reading comprehension. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase student J’s reading comprehension. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student J was both previously and at the formulation date of this IEP, reported to read passages when given a silent reading passage, but has difficulty orally explaining what was read. Also, when asked questions about key details in a story student J requires prompting. Though the student is able to write a on a topic with supporting details, teacher prompting and modeling is required to ensure accuracy.

Domain: Social Emotional Behavior

Based on teacher observation, Student J usually demonstrates age appropriate skills, the student gets along well with adults and usually gets along well with peers. Student J also shows respect for authority,
while having some challenges accepting responsibility for some actions, the student benefits from prompting during exchanges of returning responsibility. There is no impact of the disability on Student J’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum and there is no priority educational need at this time.

Domain: Independent Functioning

The impact of the disability on Student J’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum states that due to ASD the student has sensory processing difficulties affecting attention/regulation. Based on the educational impact of the disability, the priority educational need(s) for the duration of the IEP is/are is to increase time on tasks. This goal was highlighted as an unmet STAR goal as Student J was both previously and at the formulation date of this IEP, reported to have some difficulty completing work independently and staying on task and has difficulty staying organized in the classroom. Based on OT observations, teacher input, informal assessment, student work samples, student J has difficulties in the areas of visual motor and visual perceptual skills.

Domain: Communication

Based on teacher input, checklists, and observation, Student J initiates conversations with peers and adults and participates/volunteers answers in class. The student is reported to be an active participant in speech and language therapy sessions, is helpful to peers, friendly, and greets individuals by name. In the area of articulation the student has shown increased awareness of tongue placement for phonemes (i.e. L). During language therapy activities, student J benefits from prompting to remain focused on a topic of conversation and the student also appears to benefit from visual input. There is no impact of the disability on Student J’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum and there is no priority educational need at this time.
Table 5. General Education Student Data Sets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gen. Ed.</th>
<th>Curriculum and Instruction</th>
<th>Social Emotional Behavior</th>
<th>Independent Functioning</th>
<th>Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Minimal Progress</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Moderate Progress</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Substantial Progress</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. General Education Students Progress Monitoring

![Bar Chart for General Education Students Progress Monitoring]
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion of Findings

To address the needs of STAR graduates it is essential that public schools that do not administer later versions of the STAR program facilitate an evaluation process prior to enrollment to determine a child’s developmental abilities. In doing so, needs specific to academic and behavioral goal(s) are to be reviewed for modification and/or for formulation of new goals. Such goals whether new or modified must adhere to the Florida Department of Education’s (2012), Division of Public Schools, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS). Student progress reported throughout this paper clearly demonstrates that STAR graduates made progress ranging between minimal progress (0-59%), moderate progress (60-79%), and substantial progress (80-100%), since exiting the STAR program. Across all domains in the evaluation of IEP documents and regardless of classroom placement, 33% of students fell within the range of making moderate progress, 20% fell within the range of making substantial progress, and 48% of students fell within the range of making minimal progress since transitioning into the new educational environment. None of the students failed to make progress on IEP goals. The findings subsequently provide evidence that fills the gap in research for how well STAR students’ fare, when transitioning into educational settings in which STAR is not administered.

This evaluation adds additional insight into the determination of student progress. First, STAR graduates need ongoing intensive, specially designed instruction because of their Autism diagnosis. Second, as teaching strategies are put into place, the special services team must monitor the students’ progress to determine if change is taking place in terms of intensity and frequency of academic and behavioral strategies. In essence, these findings show that STAR graduates who transition into non-STAR supported schools are capable of making a range of progress. While the evaluator, observed a sample of ten STAR graduates in two elementary schools, other elementary schools housed under the same district may have a slightly different way of carrying out the process of progress monitoring of
STAR graduates due to the uniqueness of each STAR graduate’s needs. Further evaluation will be necessary to clarify the full extent of the effects of the STAR program on STAR graduates, particularly those in other elementary schools than those evaluated for this project. Perhaps, evaluating the slight difference of progress monitoring of all elementary schools with the district of Broward County Schools will allow for increasingly meaningful insights about how well STAR graduates have fared post transitions into non-STAR supported environments. For example, future studies, may build upon this evaluation of two elementary school STAR students between K-5 and focus specifically upon all 3rd grade STAR graduates in Broward County elementary schools. Discussion to follow will reflect how the research question shaped the evaluator’s judgment of student progress post transition.

**Question**

In reflecting back upon the “Evaluation Description”, the evaluator used each heading to provide a narrative for readers to identify how the findings connected with the hypothesis, or whether the evaluation encouraged a new hypothesis. What methods do public schools use to monitor the effects of the STAR program, and how do they implement strategies to sustain academic and behavioral gains received in the STAR program? This question modified the study by expanding the focus of the evaluation from the outcome-only to examination of the operations by which the staff conducted the IEPs.

**Hypothesis**

The STAR program has sustainable effects on the academic performance and behavioral outcomes of STAR program graduates.

**Findings**

The program evaluation framework was used to summarize students’ current IEPs to evaluate the essence of the students experience thus far. The evaluator used descriptions about each student’s
academic and behavioral experiences that were written and measured by the special services staff, which included an 1) ESE specialist, 2) support facilitators, 3) speech and language therapists, 4) para professionals, 5) occupational therapists, 6) physical therapists, and 7) school psychologists. In providing context to the significance of the special services provided, Broward County Public Schools has set out to provide an alternative behavior and academic curricula than the STAR program. This alternative instructs bothSTAR and non-STAR students with ASD. The rationale for special education services for students with disabilities and specifically for those with ASD focused on possible deficiencies in other autism supported curricula like that of STAR. During the evaluation, it was found that current versions of STAR do not include parent input, while students who receive exceptional student education (ESE) services in the state of Florida incorporate parents’ thoughts and observations as part of the education team (The Florida Department of Education, 2012). The findings show that direct aid provided by public schools provided a more effective alternative for STAR graduates because parent input was used in the construction of new goals and modification of unmet STAR goals for students. Other notable methods used for the formulation and management of student IEPs include but are not limited to teacher and therapist documentation, tallies, formal and informal assessments. Rather than STAR being solely responsible for sustaining outcomes, the special help given to public school students with ASD in Florida, works well in sustaining previous goals because all members of the team have a major responsibility for instructing and supporting the student (The Florida Department of Education, 2012).

In the evaluator’s attempt to state how the findings connected with hypothesis or whether the findings encouraged a new hypothesis, it is essential to reflect back upon the results and review how behavioral and academic outcomes from the STAR program are used by public schools. It was evident that Broward County Public Schools provided a range of progress (minimal progress (0-59%), moderate progress (60-79%), and substantial progress (80-100%), as each unmet STAR goal was modified to fit the appropriate exceptionality categories (The Florida Department of Education, 2012). While not all STAR students with ASD had the same needs or required the same services, the evaluation revealed
how ESE services in IEP were tailored to each child’s varied needs. So, in clarifying the hypothesis, over all domains and regardless of classroom placement, all students were documented to make progress since transitioning into the new educational environment. However, it was realized through the facilitation of the evaluation, that Broward County Public Schools had a specific method (bulleted below) that contributed to each STAR graduate’s academic and behavioral progress post transition. Therefore, it may be concluded that only in alternative autism supported programs, with methods of outcome management used by Broward County Public Schools, that the sustainable effects of the STAR program can aid in enhancing the academic and behavioral outcomes of STAR program graduates post transition. (Please refer to table below for records of progress)

- Pre-enrollment assessments that identified present behavioral and academic needs of STAR graduates
- An IEP meeting to implement goal(s) that either built upon previously attained goal(s) or modified old goal(s) of STAR.
- A reevaluation meeting that reviewed information collected during the academic school year about the STAR graduates progress in order to determine need for formulation of new goal(s) or modification of goal(s).
- Request for Parent Participation in BCPS

**Table 7. Progress monitoring for both classroom placements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAR Program Students Progress Monitoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal Progress, Moderate Progress, Substantial Progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students A-E are in Special Cluster classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students F-J are in General Education classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal Progress = 0-59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Progress = 60-79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial Progress = 80-100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The evaluation criteria used in public school breaks the annual goal into short-term objectives in order for the child to meet or exceed the percentage of accuracy by the reevaluation date.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion of a Shift to an Evaluation of Program Operations

While the purpose of this evaluation was to observe STAR graduates outcomes post-transition into public elementary schools in which STAR is not implemented, the results of the study influenced a shift towards an evaluation of program operations. Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) provided students with efficient outcome management, which contributed to the range of academic and behavioral progress documented in the results of this evaluation. The methods used by BCPS to sustain the effects of outcomes post STAR, are commonly used principles in the management of all students identified as having a special learning need (The Florida Department of Education, 2012). During the evaluation, it was discovered that upon enrollment, a special services team (parents, advocates, ESE specialist, support facilitators, speech and language therapists, para professionals, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and school psychologists) begins the problem-solving process. Members of this team work collaboratively to monitor implemented goals that match each student’s unique learning need(s).

The information gained through the evaluation oriented the evaluator to the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Florida schools provides in the assistance of students with exceptional needs. In threading this with the conceptual frameworks of the evaluation, the program evaluation framework was used to critically examine program characteristics. Like that of the MTSS, this systems of support used by BCPS conducted various methods of assessments (informal/formal evaluations, checklists, etc) to provide sufficient information for future actions regarding goal formulation and/or modification. The MTSS is also comparable to the Bronfrenbrenner Ecological Model, as all people involved are mutually responsive to one another as they worked together as partners in the care of STAR graduates and other special need students alike. Lastly, the similarity between MTSS and Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory provided an additional emphasis upon how any vulnerabilities encountered with new Autism supported material, were addressed by the special education team. All in all, this shift relates to the initial evaluation proposal because it provided greater insight to the background impact the special services team has upon STAR graduates and other ESE students meeting their annual goals and making progress throughout the course of the academic school year.
Implications

How Does it Impact Public Schools?

At an organizational level, the results of this evaluation may provide evidence to school officials that the responsibilities that go along with ESE services are being fulfilled. Procedural safeguards as addressed within the federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA (2004) are rules about what procedures the school must use in making decisions about a child’s ESE services (The Florida Department of Education, 2012). Schools have the responsibility to ensure parents receive the help and training necessary to comprehend the rights to services of their exceptional learners. This support of parents of exceptional learners (listed as parent input on IEP), for example, like parents with learners with ASD, work with schools during the IEP reevaluation meetings to settle potential disagreements and/or to monitor strategies that are deemed sufficient in resolving incidents of student standings that score below minimal progress. Additionally, this evaluation aided in bringing to the forefront, the duty schools provide for fair and developmentally appropriate ESE services.

Fortunately, the results of this evaluation using the program evaluation framework, proved beneficial in filling the gap for not only how well this specific population of STAR students are doing, but also clarified the significance of the methods used to gauge student progress. The results of the evaluation provided a new and better understanding for what methods public schools use to monitor the effects of the STAR program, and how are they implemented to sustain academic and behavioral gains by STAR graduates. The findings of this evaluation revealed the innovative way schools contribute to positive change, as the evaluation procedure prior to enrollment and reevaluation that occurs at least three times a year (The Florida Department of Education, 2012), acts as the active agent of change that the Autism community desperately needs. Furthermore, this way of advocating for the uniqueness of this disability through frequent reevaluation, demonstrates public schools’ responsibility to modify and/or create new goals and strategies specific to the child’s present needs.
How Does it Impact the Field?

The systemic principles of Marriage and Family Therapy can play a significant role in helping maintain communication among school personnel, parents, and others in the Autism service community. It is understood that if a child receives ESE services the openness of communication is vital as each individual (school personnel, parents, advocates) is seen as an important member of the education team (The Florida Department of Education, 2012). Therefore, as clinicians look at interactions among those with responsibility for the well-being of those with ASD, they can influence the way adults respond to the diagnosis. Further consideration of this collaborative process, encouraged the abilities of Marriage and Family Therapist evaluator to initiate an evaluation that reviewed the developmentally appropriate practices of special education services in schools. MFT’s can evaluate sustainable effects of Autism-supported materials for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, as systemic strategies can be made specific to address how educational systems influence the individual young student on the spectrum throughout the academic and behavioral treatment.

Having a lens for observation, the MFT evaluator implemented a review of the education team’s fidelity in recording student data (Florida Department of Education, 2012). Accurate recording aids in helping students with exceptional challenges reach goal(s) attainment. It was found that the IEP teams’ documentation was consistent and accurate. Marriage and Family Therapists too, have a fidelity to record keeping, to thereby document changes specific to client progress and setbacks in terms of goal(s) attainment.

Findings from Walsh (2012) state that reported information aids practitioners in helping families buffer expectable stresses and facilitate optimal adjustment for children and their parents. Societal attention must be called towards families that are overcome by social stigmas being a family with a young student in public school, diagnosed developmental delays and disabilities specific to ASD. Fortunately, in the evaluator’s effort to utilize the systemic/relational principles of Marriage and Family Therapy to provide informal and formal evaluations for this population, illustrates the role MFTs can play as they focus on
communication among all parts of the system and thereby instill hope for families and school personnel as they face social disparities. With the empirical support of Walsh (2012, p. 50) the evaluator was able to conclude that we are well suited to intervene and provide a clearer understanding of key processes and social supports for families of young students with ASD to thrive.

How Does it Impact Theory?

For children with ASD, the transition from preschool to elementary school is an especially critical period in a child’s development. This period can have ongoing effects, both academically and socially, even after the transition itself (DfES, 2004; Fenzel, 2000; Galton, Gray, & Ruddock, 2003; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; Thompson, Morgan, & Urquhart, 2003). This evaluation was helpful in noting the importance of continuity in goal formulation, but showed the importance of pulling goals from student IEPs that documented how previous goal(s) attainment was sustained through the implementation of new goals which built upon the successes of the old goals. Interestingly the evaluator observed how goal(s), which may not have been met, were threaded into the current IEP for continued opportunity to reach goal(s) attainment despite the transition into new non-STAR supported school environments. While, Brewin and Statham (2011) have stated that a complex range of factors are likely to contribute to difficulties during the time of transition, these interacting factors of measuring goal(s) attainment of new goals and re-administration of previous unmet goal, both played an important role when supporting STAR graduates through transition.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model

The findings of the evaluation impacts Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1992) ecological model as a basis for focus of the evaluation. The evaluator reviewed how the proposed interacting factors influenced a continuity of sustainable outcomes for STAR students. The interacting factors reviewed included the microsystem, as parents being partners in the process and active decision makers in the management of the child’s outcomes. The mesosystem, as the academic and behavioral methods schools
implemented to honor parent input. The exosystem was reflective of teacher’s duty to documentation of IEP documents. The macrosystem, concerned the government supported measurement tools schools used to document the students progress, while the chrono-system was observed to set the basis the child is expected to make changes within interims of the academic school year. After review of this multilevel system, it has become clearer to the evaluator how outcomes have been sustained post transition. Prior to the findings, a gap in the research for STAR graduates transitioning into non-STAR supported schools signaled a need for an evaluation of how children are doing in response to new Autism behavioral and academic methods of care.

Furthermore, the evaluator proposes using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1992) ecological theory as a model to conceptualize the educational environment of such special education programs used in public schools. Through the application of Bronfenbrenner’s theory, Marriage and Family Therapy clinicians who wish to facilitate evaluations can better understand the systemic nature of the educational environment by focusing attention to interactional processes. Furthermore, by evaluating STAR graduates in the context of these interactional processes, it aids in remaining mindful of how these systems inevitably interact with and influence each other in every aspect of the IEP process. While using this framework, it is critical to practice mindfulness, by maintaining “an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, (2011), p. 1042), while developing an understanding for how the quality and type of connections that exist between these contexts influences the STAR graduates progress.

Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development

The use of Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development (Erikson, 1964 & Karkouti, 2014) and MFT’s existing comprehension of Systems Theory as written by Becvar and Becvar (1999) provided a framework for understanding the documented academic and behavioral conflict resolution in the context of the social nature of the public school environment. Through use of both frameworks, the evaluator was able to explore how social conflict shaped the formulation of goal(s) towards goal(s)
attainment for each STAR student. Additionally, systems theory offered an understanding of the family participation, as parent input is a critical category included in the student IEP document. This section of the IEP, in and of itself, applies these theories in the context of how schools provide clinical treatment and concrete social services to children based upon parental concern and parental perspective of their child’s needs. This theory emphasizes upon how the role of society and conflicts take place within the developing individual. In the case of the evaluation, the evaluator sought to observe the role society (the educational construct which enforces new, non-STAR curricula) and conflict, (the effects of the transition) has upon the behavioral and academic progress of STAR graduates. Furthermore, this theory helped the evaluator focus upon the adaptive characteristics of STAR students, in their overall ability to remain on a path of developmental gains that will continue to prepare them for the future.

Program Evaluation Framework

The program evaluation framework was used to carefully guide the evaluator in the review of archived and current data of student progress. The context of in, which the Florida Department of Education’s (2012), Division of Public Schools, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS) operates, was a significant precursor to the evaluation description of this evaluation. Therefore, identification of public schools use of measurements in the form of IEPs, to record student performance within their curricula as it impacted the success of STAR students was critical. The program evaluation framework helped the evaluator remain aware of the need for programs to develop clear plans, inclusive partnerships, and feedback systems that allow learning and ongoing program improvement to occur (Koplan, 1999). Due to what was missing empirically on how STAR students fare in non-STAR supported schools, this framework provided findings that filled the gap on the performance management of this population of students. The performance management findings included the role the educational team plays in the development of performance goals, monitoring student performance, and the reporting through use of IEP documents that provide rationale for newly implemented or modified goals.
Conclusion

Prior to conducting this program evaluation, little was known about how elementary schools which do not implement the STAR program address the needs of children with ASD. Given the increasing prevalence of ASD in schools (Steinbrenner & Watson, 2015, Scull & Winkler 2011, Data Accountability Center, 2012) there are increased concerns about the outcomes for school-aged students with ASD. In focusing on the growing number of children with ASD, public schools are mandated to provide teaching methods that serve this population with enhanced effect on student’s outcomes from early intervention programs. Yet, little was known in research about how STAR graduates were doing in public schools that do not implement extensions of the STAR curriculum. The findings of this evaluation provided consistent evidence for the exact methods public schools use (evaluation prior to enrollment) to both measure the effects of the STAR program, and (reevaluation) to modify and/or formulate new IEP strategies to build upon academic and behavioral gains received in the STAR program.

Recommendations for Future Work

Some ways to expand upon this current work include but are not limited to the following, to form a more complete understanding of STAR student progress post transition into non-STAR supported public schools.

Recruit all public elementary schools in the district with K-5 grade STAR graduates in order to:

- Evaluate IEP documents of only general education enrolled K-5th grade STAR graduates to determine progress post transition.
- Evaluate IEP documents of only cluster/special program enrolled K-5th grade STAR graduates to determine progress post transition.
- Evaluate IEP documents of both cluster/special program and general education enrolled K-5th grade STAR graduates to contextualize progress regardless of classroom placement.
• Compare and contrast between classroom placements upon the recorded range of progress of STAR graduates grades K-5.

• Using any of the aforementioned methods of evaluation choose one elementary grade level to evaluate the progress of either cluster/special program or general education STAR graduates.

Though, in the evaluator’s current attempt to gather simple understanding of public schools’ abilities in managing STAR student progress post transition, the sample population included ten students enrolled in two different schools that ranged between elementary grades kindergarten through fifth grade. While the range of progress made by the evaluation sample was well-documented, the existence of more elementary schools with STAR graduates, would represent a significant advance in research of how STAR graduates are doing in all public schools that do not implement extensions of the STAR curriculum.