

Vocational Training and Transition for Disabled Adolescents

A sample

The efficacy of vocational education for students with disabilities is working successfully in many school districts and these efforts provide valuable tools in helping disabled individuals find a job and enjoy a high quality of life. There are many best practices of transition methods which will be discussed in this analysis, and they are based on successful programs practiced in schools across the country. Vocational training includes occupational training skills combined with daily life skills and socialization practices. These best programs incorporate all three components, and all are designed for job success in adulthood. This work is practiced by regular classroom teachers, school psychologists, special education teachers, rehabilitation counselors, and vocational education teachers. Often these programs exist independently in a traditional school, but more and more vocational schools are springing up around the country that have classes in carpentry, car mechanics, or small engine repair and teach on-the-job training skills in real time.

Besides academic success, the predictors for success for disabled students transitioning to adulthood are skills training in the field of the student's choosing, which includes on-the-job training and role playing with job applications and preparing for a job interview. In addition, job internships and job shadowing are also very educational. Teaching of basic skills in English and math along with problem solving skills are also highly effective and prepare the disabled student for further education in college or a technical school. The outcome of these combined efforts are to empower students with disabilities with self determination and confidence so each student, no matter what their disability, can contribute to society and live a productive life.

This analysis will discuss the best practices in transition services to students with disabilities utilized around the country and the skills these young adults are learning to go forward successfully in life. Vocational education works, but it can work better. Often specialists in vocational education (called job coaches or vocational specialists) are hard to recruit and are not paid high salaries, so turnover can be high. In addition, there are often problems getting all the components of a transition team together so all appropriate professionals are operating on the same page to help the student best assist their future progress. There is still an employment disparity between young adults with disabilities and those who are not disabled and this problem must be addressed. Likewise there are still prejudices against students with disabilities and flaws in the transition system for students that must be explored. How can the educational system and inter-agency programs further help students find employment and have successful outcomes for the future? This question will be addressed. There are always improvements that can be made in any system and those improvements will be analyzed here in detail. Recommendations will be made for improvement and summarized.

In the past individuals with disabilities were judged based on harmful stereotypes and biased assumptions. They were widely stigmatized which resulted in economic and social marginalization and left disabled individuals out of society at large. Often individuals with disabilities were institutionalized or lived their entire lives in asylums. Many disabled individuals were objects of ridicule and performed in carnivals or were objects of curiosity, but mostly disabled people were invisible and hidden from a derisive and uninformed society. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had to keep his disability mostly hidden, was elected four times in war-torn America and brought some understanding to the positive contributions disabled people could make to society. But still the laws and public perceptions were slow to change. In the 1940's and 50's disabled veterans pressed the government for vocational education and rehabilitation, but despite some initial changes, disabled people still did not have access to public transportation to public buildings, nor could they be considered eligible for meaningful work.

It was not until the civil rights movement in the 1960's that disabled individuals started fighting for equal rights. In the 1970's parents and civil rights advocates for disabilities marched on Washington and the Rehabilitation act in 1973 gave rights to employment for all people, including disabled Americans. The Education Act was passed in 1975 which allowed disabled children access to public schools. By 1990, individualized education plans (IEPs) were designed with parental involvement to help their children get a good education. In 1990, educational advances for disabled individuals changed for good:

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was renamed in 1990 to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which further elaborated on the inclusion of children with disabilities into regular classes, but also focused on the rights of parents to be involved in the educational decisions affecting their children. IDEA required that an Individual Education Plan be designed with parental approval to meet the educational needs of a child with a disability (Switzer 2003).

The ADA, passed in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act, required public businesses and institutions to provide reasonable access to disabled persons:

Public services could no longer deny services to people with disabilities (such as public transportation systems), all public accommodations were expected to have modifications made to be accessible to people with disabilities, and all telecommunications services were mandated to offer adaptive services to people with disabilities. With this piece of legislation, the US government identified the full participation, inclusion and integration of people with disabilities in all levels of society (Switzer 2003).

From that point, physical and mental disabilities were organized into the following categories so that individual help could be rendered:

- a. Serious emotional disturbance
- b. Learning disabilities
- c. Mental retardation (or ID)
- d. Traumatic brain injury
- e. Autism
- f. Vision and hearing impairments
- g. Physical disabilities
- h. Other health impairments.

After physical and mental disabilities were diagnosed by the appropriate professionals, programs such as supported employment was created and serves as one of the most successful ways for disabled individuals to find employment. Supported Employment is competitive work in an integrated setting. Support is provided in an ongoing manner and includes on-the-job training skills, job modifications, educational support, and transportation to and from a prospective job. This training provides flexibility and full participation for disabled persons in the workplace. There are problems with supported employment, however, and they will be outlined in this analysis.

Michael Harvey states what is expected of disabled adolescents in this day and age and explains the importance of transition:

The economy of the United States is driven by the production and sales of goods and services with an emphasis on productivity. Employment and training of the nation's workforce is at the core of a strong economy. This is especially true in today's climate of high technology, e-commerce, real time demand, and intense global competition for market share. Students with disabilities are defined as those identified with one or more of the 13 disability categories specified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and served by an individualized educational program (IEP). The central theme in special education transition has been an emphasis on post-school outcomes, primarily focused in the area of employment. The interest in transition is multi-faceted, but the most compelling reason is economic. Being gainfully employed and functionally independent is the "expected" post school adult outcome in American society (Harvey 2001).

In "Rehabilitation Counseling, Special Education, and Vocational Special needs Education: Three Transition Disciplines," Edna Szymanski, Ceryl Maxwell, and Susan Asselin explain the three key professions in vocational education who provide transition and what each one is responsible for. First, there is the Rehabilitation Counselor, which is a nationally certified position requiring a master's degree and provides the following services:

The goal of rehabilitation counseling is to optimize the congruence between individuals and their selected environments (e.g., jobs) by environment-centered interventions (e.g., job modifications, job restructuring) (Szymanski et. al, 2009).

Cerified Rehabilitation counselors (CRC) work with students “through a variety of employment settings, including, but not limited to: school districts, state VR agencies, rehabilitation facilities, and private rehabilitation companies (Szymanski et. al, 2009)

Special education teachers, who only need a bachelors degree, work with (1) curriculum development, (2) basic skills instruction, (3) class management, (4) professional consultation and communication (5) teacher-parent-student relationship, (6) student-student relationship, (7) exceptional conditions, (8) referral, (9) individualized teaching, [and] (10) professional values (Szymanski et. al., 2009). Certification is determined by each state. There is a shortage of teachers in this discipline, especially in secondary education, which results in hiring teachers without the “requisite specialized preparation” (Szymanski et. al., 2009).

Vocational Education teachers work with “special populations (e.g. , students with disabilities, disadvantaged students) in secondary and postsecondary vocational programs (Szymanski et. al., 2009) The primary tasks of vocational education teachers is as follows:

Identification of learning needs, instructional planning, modification of materials and environments, communication, preparation for employment, counseling and career planning, and teaching life role skills (Hamilton & Harrington 1980).

One problem is finding the types of professionals who can provide on-the-job skills training and also possess the communication skills to work with special education teachers and Rehabilitation Counselors. In addition, vocational teachers must work closely with students who have intellectual or physical challenges. Often, vocational education teacher are professionals highly specialized in one area of expertise and have not received the requisite education courses they need to teach disabled youth. Because of this lack of education and information on individual disabilities, vocational education teachers don't always understand the medical or psychological needs of a disabled individual. Because vocational teachers lack this knowledge it is especially important for these teachers to be in close contact with the special education instructor and the rehabilitation counselor so he or she can make modifications or accommodations for the students when necessary. It is also important that vocational education teachers, not familiar with education methods and procedures, spend time in in-service programs for disabled adolescents and learn how to identify and solve problems that may come up with this population. Some vocational education teachers hold degrees, while some are professionals with degrees in other fields. In some instances the vocational education teacher is not degreed and has to work towards certification on the job. There “is wide variation

of hiring criteria across states and work settings” (Szymanski et. al., 2009) and vocational educators are often hard to find:

Rebecca Evers (1996) states that vocational teachers need more preparation because they often haven’t taken the education classes needed to teach students:

Of major importance to the service delivery issue is the preservice preparation of vocational educators, especially those teaching technical classes or trade skills (e.g., wood, metal, automotive), whose training and educational backgrounds differ from those of the majority of public school teachers. Historically, technical and trade-skill teachers do not have baccalaureates, but earn their teaching certificates from a particular division of **vocational education** through their related trade experiences (Cobb & Neubert, 1992). Most recent data (U.S. Department of **Education**, 1994b) indicate that 12% of **vocational** teachers have not earned baccalaureates: Six percent hold associate's degrees, 4% have only an occupational license, and 2% have only a high school diploma.

There are many reasons to improve the recruitment of qualified vocational education teachers and many reasons why finding appropriate staff is difficult. Ronald Conley (2003) reported “about 15% of the positions reported by service providers are vacant,” and schools have trouble keeping staff because of low wages paid to vocational teachers. Conley states “Over 90% of the service providers reported that low salaries were the most important factor that interfered with their ability to recruit or retain employees providing vocational services” and the average length of employment was three years or less. This is a problem which must be addressed if we are to build strong vocational programs for disabled students across the country.

Despite great gains made in vocational transition for disabled adolescents, many of which will be addressed here, the statistics remain grim for employment for disabled individuals. According to the National Organization on Disability (2004), only 35% of people with disabilities are employed, whereas the corresponding figure for the general population is 78%.” Solutions to this problem are constantly reflected in the literature and new efforts to reach across the barriers disabled individuals face are very important in the fields of special and vocational education. Problems and solutions will be addressed in this analysis.

Several factors of regarding efficacy will be discussed for success in transition for disabled students including programs that work, problems of race, personality types who do best with transition and how the type of disability affects the outcome of successful transition. The problems include a high number of young adults with disability still living at home, an absence of real job skills being taught, ineffective vocational transition programs and the lack of postsecondary school emphasized in vocational education programs.

Proper Assessment is the key and first step:

First, how is a transition team formed for each individual student and how do the professionals in the team work together for the improvement of life skills and job skills for a student with disabilities? Disabilities include ID, intellectual disability formally referred to as mental retardation, learning disabilities that affect the brain's ability to process information, vision and hearing impairments, orthopedically disordered, and sensory impairments. Some students might have a combination of two disorders. After the disability is diagnosed, and a special education teacher is assigned to attend to academic needs, an individualized plan of instruction (IEP) must be developed which targets effective educational strategies for intervention to help the student learn more effectively. More is involved than just IQ tests; a holistic view of the student's strengths and weaknesses from all three professionals on the team are reviewed and actions are taken in all areas the individual needs help. The IEP is shared with the regular classroom teacher, the rehabilitation counselor, and the vocational teacher and thus a transition team is born. The family also participates and are an integral part of the team. First there are guidelines that must be followed by law:

The law regarding vocational rehabilitation for transition include the following:

Under the 1992 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act, vocational rehabilitation services are defined as any service or goods necessary to prepare an individual with a disability for employment. Services include but are not limited to the following:

- Assessment for determining eligibility or vocational rehabilitation needs, including assessment of rehabilitation technology needs if appropriate;
- Counseling and work-related placement services, including assistance with job search, placement, retention, and any follow-up or follow-along needed to assist in maintaining, regaining, or advancing in employment;
- Vocational and other training services, including personal and vocational adjustment, books, or other training materials. Training in higher education institutions cannot be paid for unless maximum efforts have been made to obtain grant assistance from other sources;
- Physical and mental restorative services such as corrective surgery, eye glasses, and diagnosis and treatment for mental and emotional disorders;
- Occupational licenses, equipment, tools, and basic stocks and supplies;
- Transportation needed to participate in any vocational service;
- Technological aids and devices; and,
Supported employment services. (Section 103 a) (Dowdy & Evers 1996)

Luecking and Gramlich (2003) identified the following attributes of a good transition program for disabled youth:

1. Clear program goals;
2. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for supervisors, mentors, teachers, support personnel, and other partners;
3. Tailored plans with specific learning goals and outcomes that relate directly to the individual students' learning;

4. Convenient links between students, schools, and employers;
5. On-the-job learning objectives;
6. Completion of a range of work-based learning opportunities;
7. Mentors at the work site;
8. Clear expectations and feedback to assess progress toward achieving goals;
9. Assessment to identify skills, interests, and support needs at the work site;
10. Reinforcement of work-based learning outside of work; and
11. Appropriate academic, social, and administrative support for students, employers and partners

In addition, James Koller (1994) argues for situational assessment to “develop realistic job expectations” for effective transition:

Situational assessment is an ever-evolving dynamic evaluation . . . Situational assessment is an ever-evolving, dynamic evaluation involving the placement of an individual directly on a real world job, not in the typical vocational evaluation or contrived work sample laboratory. As a process, SA generally consists of four broad phases:

1. **Specific Job/Task Analysis.** Utilizing the format suggested through the use of *The Revised Handbook for Analyzing Jobs* (1991), each job task is analyzed for potential strengths and weaknesses identified in the psychoeducational evaluation and the review of school records, including teacher comments. This allows the evaluator the generation of more realistic strategies to meet the specific needs encountered by the individual in real life.
2. **Job Teaching.** A job coach teaches the job tasks to the person being evaluated and assesses each task directly as it is performed. When the task has been determined to be a functional limitation (unable to be performed the standard way), a strategy or job accommodation is developed and observed. The most important source of accommodation strategies is the consumer, while the job coach assists in the generalization of skills to other areas.
3. **Development of Accommodation Strategies.** The strategies developed are taught directly to the consumer for self-implementation to meet job performance standards. The use of assistive technology, job restructuring, and adaptive teaching strategies are often found to be beneficial.
4. **Empowerment.** Through guided and repeated practice coupled with positive reinforcement, the consumer gains in confidence and his/her performance on the job can then be video-taped for use by the rehabilitation counselor, school personnel, employer, and the consumer for continued vocational planning, job placement, and self-advocacy.

Thus, Standardized assessments allows for the establishment of individually designed strategies to test specific daily vocational job duties found in the natural environment. By directly placing the individual in a real job, the opportunity to observe him or her in a real world environment over an extended period of time provides the best measure of future job success (Koller, 1994)

With all of the competencies just addressed, a successful IEP must be drawn for disabled vocational student in transition. The IEP is an important legal document and specifically addresses the student's learning needs and exactly what accommodations and learning strategies will be addressed to meet short and long-term goals, which are set up. An important part of the IEP for adolescents is to address what needs the student will encounter after high school in a transition setting. This is why it is vital, at this point, for the vocational educators, the special education teachers and the rehabilitation counselors to work closely together to address post secondary plans of the student. The student will take assessment tests regarding career interests and will be actively enrolled in vocational programs to help them develop skills in finding a career. Good vocational programs will also teach students how to prepare to get a job through a formal job interview. In addition, skills will also be taught regarding how to fill out job applications and how to prepare for independent living. Family is very important in these evaluations. In each IEP, the family has a lot of input and can make constructive suggestions. The transition stage of an IEP usually starts at age sixteen to start preparing the student to make plans post high school and learn how best to achieve the goals of each student.

One program that is growing in popularity in vocational transition are "tech-prep" programs. Evers (1996) points out that comprehensive tech-prep programs need to have the following components:

The curriculum is competency based, stressing assessment of the competencies needed by workers in realistic settings, including (a) basic skills (e.g., reading, writing, arithmetic, listening, speaking); (b) thinking skills (e.g., creativity, decision making, problem solving, reasoning, the ability to visualize abstract information); and (c) personal qualities (e.g., responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity).

The legislated Mandates of IDEA the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Carl D. Perkins key concepts are important to know in formulating IEPs and include the following:

- 1) Vocational teachers need to be present at IEP meetings to represent their technical training area, address occupational skills, labor market needs, and program accommodation/modifications

- 2) IEP transitional planning teams are required to explore student's interests and preferences concerning post-school transitional goals. In doing so, programming and services need to be based on realistic outcomes, especially in employment.
- 3) Matching student interest, ability, and realistic job opportunities in labor markets should govern program placements and accommodations as part of secondary transitional services for students and disabilities (Wagner 1991)

To be continued..