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Preparing Students With Disabilities for School-to-Work Transition and Postschool Life

Preparing students with disabilities for the workforce requires a comprehensive transdisciplinary vocational assessment and an emphasis on postschool planning.

By Edward M. Levinson and Eric J. Palmer

Work is a central part of adult life, consuming as much as half of our waking hours. People often identify themselves by the work that they do. A job can provide a sense of accomplishment and pride and have an enormous effect on our overall life satisfaction, or it can serve as a source of frustration and dissatisfaction. Finding the right job—simply knowing what it might be—is not easy, even for highly skilled individuals. Doing so is even more difficult for those who lack adequate training or face special challenges, such as a disability. According to nationwide studies, as many as 66% of working adults never had a career plan and are currently working at their jobs because of chance factors or

the influence of others or because it was the only job available. Only about half of these workers are satisfied with their job situation (Brown & Minor, 1989; Hoyt & Lester, 1995).

Preparing students for the workforce is an important role for schools—or at least it should be. However, most U.S. high schools emphasize college preparation, which often overshadows attention to actual workforce readiness. Although a college degree is an excellent advantage in finding a rewarding job for a great number of people, postsecondary education is not the optimal or even possible choice for many students. Unfortunately, about half of U.S. students leave high school without the knowledge or skills needed to find and maintain a job (U.S.

Department of Labor, 1991), and one-third of students are not prepared for even entry-level work (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1993).

Transition Services for Students With Disabilities

Compared to their nondisabled peers, students with disabilities are more likely to experience unemployment or under-employment, lower pay, and job dissatisfaction (Dunn, 1996). Many students with disabilities—as well as those with chronic achievement problems—drop out of high school before graduating, leaving them even more unprepared for and less likely to obtain a job. High schools can better engage and support these students by helping identify their strengths and interests and providing them with the skills (or a plan for gaining them) they need to succeed in the workplace.

According to the Twenty-First Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with

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Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 1999), only about one-fourth of students with disabilities graduate from high school with a diploma; however, these students were less likely to drop out of school and more likely to be competitively employed if they received adequate vocational education training in high school. Further, there are key legal entitlements—the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Act and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—that mandate workforce preparation for students with disabilities. School administrators should be familiar with these provisions for vocational assessment and training and ensure that school programs are consistent with these mandates.

Of course, many students with disabilities do go to college and have great success, and school personnel should never downgrade their expectations for these students. It is important for principals to build the capacity of their staff members to help students and their parents accurately determine what vocational and life skills training is appropriate. The core elements of workforce preparation for students with disabilities are the same as those for their nondisabled peers—awareness of interests and aptitudes, exposure to career options, and assessing and building skills—but they require more extensive and individualized support from school personnel and other adults.

Assessment and Planning: Keys to Successful Postschool Transitions
Transdisciplinary Assessment

A major ingredient of a successful school-to-work transition program is a comprehensive, transdisciplinary vocational assessment that integrates a variety of school and community agency personnel into the assessment process. The assessment process should include teachers, counselors, and psychologists—as well as representatives from community mental health/mental retardation, vocational rehabilitation, and social services agencies—who work together to identify relevant transition needs and plan appropriate services. Parents, state agencies, employers, business organizations, and students must also be involved in the vocational assessment to some extent.

The goal of the vocational assessment is to facilitate educational and vocational planning that will allow a student to make a successful adjustment to work, postsecondary education, and community living. Without a comprehensive assessment of a student's skills, it is difficult to identify the needs that should be addressed in the student's transition plan.

Components of a Comprehensive Vocational Assessment

Assessment data can be gathered through published tests and surveys as well as from directly interviewing and observing a student. The assessment should address the following areas:
• Academic skills
• Daily living skills
• Personal and social skills
• Occupational and vocational skills (including performance tests that assess a student's ability to perform specific joblike tasks; work samples that expose a student to natural job responsibilities; and situational assessments that measure a student's interests, abilities, and work habits in actual and contrived work environments)
• Career maturity (the extent to which a student possesses adequate understanding of themselves, adequate understanding of the work world, and adequate decision-making skills)
• Vocational interests (assessment tools include Self-Directed Search [SDS], the Strong Interest Inventory; the Career Key; and the Occupational Aptitude Survey and Interest Assessment, second edition [OASIS II])
• Vocational aptitudes (assessment tools include the Differential Aptitude Test [DAT], the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery [ASVAB], and the Occupational Aptitude Survey and Interest Assessment, second edition [OASIS II]).

Strengths (advantages) and weaknesses (disadvantages) in each area

MANDATED VOCATIONAL SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Two key legislative acts that address workforce preparation of students are the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The purpose of the Perkins Act, which is currently in the process of being reauthorized, is to provide technical training and education to students who do not necessarily plan on going to college. The act requires schools to provide parents and students with:
• Vocational education opportunities, which should be offered to the student by the beginning of ninth grade or one year before the student enters the grade in which vocational education is offered
• Eligibility requirements for enrolling in vocational education.
In addition, students with disabilities are entitled to receive:
• An assessment of interests, abilities, and special needs as well as other special services designed to help students enrolled in vocational education transition into postschool employment or training.
• Career assessment, planning, training, and school-to-work transition services. IDEA requires schools to provide services to students with disabilities that will help them make a successful transition from school to postschool activities—such as work, continued training or education, and other aspects of community living.
• By age 14, a student should have a transition plan incorporated into their IEP that specifies what services the student needs to make a successful transition from high school to work and community living, what career activities the student should undertake, and who will be providing the required services.

should be identified and inferences should made about how these factors will affect the student's ability to make a successful transition from school to work and community living. The information should then be used to help establish realistic occupational and independent living goals for the student.

Roles of Professionals in Assessment and Planning

Team members' roles in the assessment and transition planning process will vary according to their interests, expertise, and the amount of time each has to devote to the process. Principals can assume a leadership role by encouraging and establishing links with community agencies, promoting a transdisciplinary approach to the assessment and planning process, assisting in the development of specific policies and procedures relevant to the process, and ensuring that adequate resources are devoted to assessment and planning. Although principals may oversee the assessment and planning process in their schools, special education coordinators and transition coordinators may share some of the responsibility for case management and oversight of the process for individual students. School psychologists should be involved in conducting psychoeducational assessments, explaining assessment results, and making recommendations to the team. In particular, school psychologists can assist in gathering information relevant to a student's cognitive, academic, and interpersonal skills. Counselors can also assist in data collection by administering vocational interest and aptitude measures, providing career guidance, coordinating career days or career fairs, and matching the student with appropriate classes.

Liaisons from state agencies, such as representatives from the state offices of vocational rehabilitation, mental health/mental retardation, and social services, should also be involved in the process. Such agencies provide case management services and funding for services that students will need when

IMPORTANT VOCATIONAL SKILLS TO LEARN

Vocational training should provide students with a curriculum that prepares them for the job that they intend to enter. Broad-based knowledge and skills are good, but for some students with disabilities, specific skills are necessary for survival in the workplace and in the community and need to be explicitly taught.

Academic Skills
- Reading and writing (e.g., sight-word vocabulary, spelling, handwriting, typing, etc.)
- Math (e.g., basic computation, money, measurement)
- Problem solving
- Listening comprehension
- Speaking
- Computer
- Art or music
- Foreign language

Communication Skills
- Following and giving directions accurately
- Communicating information
- Understanding and processing information
- Requesting or offering assistance

Social and Interpersonal Skills
- Answering the phone and taking a message
- Making necessary phone calls to employers and other professionals as part of a job requirement
- Displaying appropriate workplace behavior and etiquette
- Knowing appropriate topics for discussion in the workplace
- Knowing when and when not to socialize on the job
- Learning how to protect themselves from victimization
- Learning social problem-solving techniques

Occupational and Vocational Skills
There are a number of skills and behaviors that most, if not all, jobs require. It is important to help students who do not already possess these skills acquire them. Examples of these activities include the following:
- Using a time card and punch clock
- Arriving to work on time
- Calling when sick
- Requesting vacation time
- Using the appropriate voice tone and volume
- Accepting instructions and corrections
- Knowing appropriate interaction with coworkers (i.e., getting along; social problem solving; making friends; and recognizing personal, professional, and sexual boundaries)

There are also a number of skills that students should have to be as independent as possible in their future job searches; these skills include the following:
- Looking for jobs (advertisements in the newspaper and online, neighborhood help-wanted signs, and local resources)
- Filling out job applications
- Writing résumés and cover letters
- Obtaining necessary identification (photo ID, birth certificate)
- Filling out paperwork (W2 forms, I-9 forms, employer paperwork)
- Having interviewing skills

they leave high school. Representatives from these agencies can help arrange community living, job training, education, transportation, and employment. For example, many vocational rehabilitation agencies are involved in training students for employment, helping students obtain and maintain employment, and transitioning them into work settings. Further, these representatives

can help students and their families file the necessary paperwork and application materials to ensure that all necessary services are available to the students when they leave school.

Finally, the student should be actively involved in the transition planning process and attend all meetings. It is the student's future that is at stake, and he or she should begin to take

responsibility for important decisions about the future. Including students at transition planning meetings also increases their self-determination and their ability to set goals and make choices.

School Support for Postschool Planning

School administrators and staff members can help students prepare for the world of work in a number of ways. To do so effectively, however, they should have a working knowledge of the stages of career development and of the general career-related objectives that exist at these various stages. In general, the three most important goals for students are to gain an understanding of themselves and their abilities, interests, and values; gain an understanding of the world of work; and acquire effective

decision-making skills. Each of these areas is important to students' ability to make realistic and informed decisions about work, and school-based activities should focus on these three areas.

Principals can promote the importance of staff member attendance and provide input at transition planning meetings. Teachers are an integral part of forming and implementing many of the student's goals, and they can provide valuable feedback and recommendations about the strengths and interests of their students.

It is also imperative for teachers to support students' career development. Many students tend to have unrealistic career expectations and either overestimate or underestimate their potential for a certain career. Teachers can help encourage, guide, and redirect students with unrealistic expectations toward more realistic career goals. For example, a student may aspire to be a veterinarian, but the teacher may know that the student has not attained the level of achievement necessary to enter college. In this case, the teacher might redirect the student to more attainable goals, such as becoming an animal groomer, working or volunteering at an animal shelter, or working at a pet store. Again, a proper assessment and interview process can help to determine the basis of a particular career interest.

Principals can encourage classroom teachers to get students thinking about realistic careers. For instance, when teaching math or reading skills, teachers can emphasize how those skills are necessary in everyday life and in most jobs. Teachers should incorporate real-world applications into their instruction and discuss how the skills that are being taught are used in occupations that are of high interest to students. Teachers can also introduce a career theme for a day and talk about how the subject they are teaching is used in that career. For example, if food service is the theme, a teacher might talk about measuring quantities, keeping track of stocked goods, making change, balancing the

CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Knowledge of career development theory goes hand-in-hand with transition planning because career development theory provides stakeholders with a timeline to gauge where a child is developmentally in relation to typical students; helps professionals interpret assessment data by knowing what should and should not be expected of a child at a certain age; and helps guard against setting unrealistic expectations for students (e.g., thinking a student should make a career choice when that student is still learning about his or her own skills and interests).

The following is an overview of the stages and substages children progress through (along with objectives) during their career-development process.

GROWTH STAGE
Fantasy Substage (0–10 years)
- Imagination and play themes revolve around work

Interest Substage (11–12 years)
- Children form a healthy self-concept and become aware of their personal qualities
- Children become aware of and consider a variety of careers and learn about what workers do and about the value of work
- Children identify with a gender role and think of jobs in terms of gender
- Children develop positive attitudes that lead to competence, cooperation, and achievement

Capacity Substage (13–14 years)
- Adolescents become aware of their own values and abilities
- Adolescents develop planning, decision-making, and problem-solving skills
- Adolescents recognize that not all jobs are the same, that there is a difference

in requirements, duties, pay, and rewards among careers
- Adolescents realize that academic choices may affect their post–high school life
- Adolescents take on increased responsibility for making their own career-related decisions

EXPLORATION STAGE
Tentative (15–17 years)
- Adolescents become aware of their own aspirations
- Adolescents identify career options and set tentative goals
- Adolescents explore their tentative career options and goals

Transition (18–21 years)
- Young adults make a career choice
- Young adults learn skills needed for entry-level employment in their career of choice

Trial (22–24 years)
- Young adults follow through with obtaining a job in their career of choice

Source: Levinson, E. M. (2002). Best practices in school-based vocational assessment. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology IV* (pp. 1569–1584). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

books, and even discussing such areas as statistics (e.g., calculating what the busiest time of day is and trying to predict how much food will be needed). Such real-world applications of subject matter can also be incorporated into homework and tests. Guest speakers can be invited to speak to students about various careers and the skills that are required to pursue these careers.

Teachers can also provide students with work experiences by setting up a simulated work environment in the classroom. Students can be "paid" for "work," academic performance, social skills, or classroom chores. Field trips can be an effective way to expose students to various occupations. Finally, teachers can have students read job advertisements, fill out job applications, create résumés, and role-play job interviews and provide feedback to students about their performance on these activities.

Encouraging Parent Support

School administrators can help set the tone for parent involvement in their children's career planning. Parents are important members of the transdisciplinary team and should be encouraged to provide input to the team about their child's interests, aptitudes, strengths, weaknesses, and goals. They should also be encouraged to actively participate in IEP meetings and assist the team in developing their child's IEP. In particular, they should help the team develop specific goals and objectives—regarding their child's future education, training, and employment—to be included in the IEP.

Schools can further help parents support their children's career and vocational explorations by offering presentations and workshops. Such training can encourage parents to help increase their child's occupational awareness by talking with them about their own work experiences and career decisions and can provide parents with local resources to explore various career options with their children.

Conclusion

For most people, work is essential to a livelihood, a sense of worth and accomplishment, and overall life satisfaction. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of students with disabilities or low academic performance do not go on to experience steady, satisfying, or gainful employment. Schools must give more focus, in both time and resources, to preparing noncollege track students for work or postschool training. A comprehensive transdisciplinary approach to both assessment and planning are essential elements of programs that successfully prepare students for postschool life. **PL**

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