

Transition of Students with Disabilities to Post Secondary Education or Work Environment

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KEYWORDS Counseling. Planning. Assessment. Vocational. College/University

ABSTRACT Transition programs are based on the individual student's needs, taking into account strengths, preferences, and interests. Effective transition programs focus on skills that help the student to attain post high school goals. What is critical in the successful transition of students with disabilities from high school to work environments or postsecondary education is accurate knowledge about their abilities, capabilities, limitations and civil rights. This paper attempts to help educators equip students with the necessary skills to make informed choices on work environments or course options for successful transition.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses a traditionally untapped area or rare piece in the system puzzle of preparing individuals with learning disabilities to meet the challenges of adulthood. For a long time most professional efforts (Patton and Blalock 2002), have focused on academic preparation from the time students with learning disabilities were recognized. The same authors go on to point out that the rest of the person's adult adjustment (self-determination, life skills and community living, vocational preparation and employment, etc.) has largely been left to the individuals concerned. Among other factors, the attitude and self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities may be two of the most important factors in determining their success or failure in postsecondary education or work related environment (Mpofu et al. 2011). Transition programs are discussed to explore all the options that the youth need to consider in order to prepare for adulthood. Services are intended to prepare students to make the transition from the world of school to the world of adulthood. In planning what type of transition services a student needs to prepare for adulthood, a team of professionals involved need to consider areas such as postsecondary education or vocational training, employment, independent living, and community participation.

The transition services themselves are a coordinated set of activities that are based on the student's needs, capabilities, academic and social skills and that take into account his or her preferences and interests. Students with disabili-

ties need to be prepared to work collaboratively with all interested parties and coordinators, to enable them to have an equal opportunity to participate in an institution's programs and activities (Mpofu et al. 2010). Transition programs include activities that focus on improving the academic, social, psychological, interpersonal skills and functional achievement of a student with disabilities to promote the student's movement from high school to post- high school activities. Post- high school activities can include college, vocational training, employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living or community participation. Education systems, policies and services tend to be uncoordinated or fragmented and youth with disabilities and their families seem to lack guidance and proper information needed to navigate the transition into tertiary education or work related environments successfully (Committee on Disability in America 2007; Stewart et al. 2013). Transition planning is discussed as a dynamic vehicle by which to empower students and families to utilize strengths, interests and individual abilities in order to achieve short-term and long-term goals.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

1. Prepare individual students with learning difficulties to meet the challenges of adulthood.
2. Guide professionals who help students in their transition focus not only on academic skills but on social, psychological, voca-

- tional, employment and community living skills.
3. Help students have a realistic view of their limitations, capabilities and options available to make informed course, career or vocational choices.
 4. Guide professionals to assess the needs of colleges, universities and work environments and prepare students accordingly.
 5. Encourage professionals to equip students with the necessary basic skills such as; study habits, job search, job maintenance, social and self-advocacy skills.

TRANSITION CHALLENGES

Many potential barriers exist for young people with disabilities (White 2002; Bennett et al. 2005). Current evidence from the literature review about the transition to adulthood for youth with disabilities indicates that the process is extremely challenging. While there are substantial individual personal challenges such as physical, sensory, cognitive and communicative limitations, environmental barriers often present the most significant challenges for transition (Committee on Disability in America 2007; Stewart et al. 2013). Different disabilities pose different restrictions to perform certain functions, such as communication, personal care, speech, loco-motor and other bodily related activities, in a manner or within a range considered normal. The nature and severity of the restriction produces observable performance and handicap difficulties, which may be augmented by assistive devices, appliances, aids or another person. For example, these young people may not acquire certain concepts or skills without assistance, or obtain the same amount of a variety of pre-vocational skills and work experiences; they may lack training in basic skills such as job search, job maintenance, mobility or transportation, and self-advocacy skills. Schools and other career counseling agencies may lack specialized personnel and society may have lower performance expectations for them. Unless both educational and vocational programs incorporate activities that examine the concept of disability, and the accompanying barriers, they will not prepare people with disabilities adequately in order for them to enter college/university or work environment and succeed.

Planning

Planning for the future of the individual student with disabilities often requires a paradigm shift, mind set and critical evaluation from everyone involved. Post secondary programs change from overcoming deficits and approaching developmental norms to transition goals. Transition programs bearing in mind individual disability impact, target activities and services that capitalize on the students' abilities, strengths, needs, preferences, and interests. It is important to be aware that the criteria for substantiating a learning disability in post-secondary institutions can be somewhat different from that of high schools. A full understanding of the differences between the responsibilities of high schools and colleges and universities is critical to successful transition (Charema and Johnson 2010). Transition programs should be properly planned while students with disabilities are still in high school. Before leaving high school and entering the world of work or other post-secondary settings, young people with disabilities must master a number of career developmental tasks in relation to their disabilities. Practitioners and researchers have suggested that many aspects (social, academic and interpersonal skills) are necessary and applicable to young people with disabilities (Timmons et al. 2004). Such skills need to combine situational and personal determinants with life-roles and life-stages to explain career development across the lifespan. During the school-to-work transition, most young people have entered an exploration stage, which fosters the exploration of personal characteristics and career opportunities. As career opportunities and realities are clarified, young people make tentative career selections, test them through fantasy, discussions, and/or work experiences, and consider them as possible life-roles.

Transition programs should take into account participants' interests, capabilities, and values, and then practice communicating these personal characteristics in real life situations. In addition, the program facilitators can examine ways in which some people with disabilities have successfully bridged the gap between school and career. People with disabilities often face barriers that negatively affect their self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Recognizing the true potential of persons with disabilities and appre-

ciating the possible effects of frequent, negative experiences can help to minimize the impact. The programs should allow the participants to examine barriers to career success and give the participant an opportunity to identify their own barriers and contemplate strategies to overcome them. They also consider ways in which other people with disabilities have confronted career barriers. Finally, they revise their personal plans for addressing barriers and to formalize their action plans in order to achieve their career goals. While in developed countries such preparation plans can be made and implemented successfully, for example the "Threshold" transition program was implemented successfully in the United States (Jamieson et al. 1993). The same cannot be said about developing countries. Most developing countries particularly in Southern Africa can have excellent transition plans on paper but implementation is hampered by lack of resources, lack of qualified personnel, unemployment, limited university/college places, limited job opportunities and negative social attitudes.

Transition Counseling

Transition counseling provides referrals to college/university education, career training and social services. In developing countries, outreach programs into rural areas, semi-urban and urban areas could be arranged to help young people with disabilities visit colleges/universities as well as work environments to familiarize themselves with both college/university and work environments before they make choices, engage and commit themselves. Professionals such as psychologists, counselors, social workers and educational advisors could set up centres in well known schools and growth points to help students from rural communities. This would alleviate the problem of the shortage of transport which is largely unreliable and the roads are un-rehabilitated. Among other things counseling programs offer information on college/university course options, career options and the type of academic and occupational training needed to succeed in the workplace. With limited industries in developing countries for internship or attachment, secondary schools and counseling program facilitators need to foster relationships with companies and industrial developers. Through counseling programs in-

dividuals are helped to have a realistic view of their limitations and capabilities and the options available for them in order to make informed choices. A counseling program also serves as a hub that feeds colleges/universities and the open market with suitable and functional individuals with disabilities. Transition programs should also allow people with disabilities to be exposed to networking with their counterparts in different colleges or work environments in order for them to share experiences. Studies carried out on transition counseling (Kosine 2005), indicate that transition programs are critical in preparing students with learning disabilities to enter postsecondary education and work environment.

Assessment and Adjustments

Relevant assessment culture-friendly tools are necessary for effective assessment in order to establish the required adjustments to help young people with disabilities function successfully. The main objective is for these young people to gain an understanding of themselves considering their abilities, interests and values. The protection of civil rights of people with disabilities in employment is intended to level the playing field by providing equal access and opportunity for success in the work place. They also need to understand the world of work, and acquire effective decision-making skills. As cited by Joyce and Rossen (2006), many students with learning disabilities tend to have unrealistic career expectations sometimes due to influence from friends, parents and relatives. Sometimes they under-estimate or over-estimate their potential for certain courses or career options. The same authors further explain that proper assessment can help encourage, guide, and redirect students with unrealistic expectations toward more realistic career goals. On some assessments that were carried out with a group of young people with disabilities, pretest-posttest differences in the first setting showed a significant improvement in vocational decision-making abilities (Siegel et al. 1992). In the second setting, significant improvements in vocational decision-making abilities and self-appraisal skills were also observed. Participants in the first test had a poor understanding of career decision-making strategies, but a good understanding of who they were, prior to entering the pro-

gram. Therefore, the initial characteristics of the participants seemed critical in determining whether or not notable improvement would occur. Psychologists should be involved in conducting psycho-educational assessments, explaining assessment results, and making recommendations to the team. Both psychologists and counselors can assist on gathering information relevant to a student's cognitive, academic and interpersonal skills and match students with appropriate course or career options. The team of specialists should discuss and educate young people with disabilities on academic adjustments particularly those who opt to join college or university education. Adjustments may also apply to work environments where certain individuals take much longer than usual to complete certain tasks. Such adjustments may be very necessary with certain individuals in their college or university education or work environment. These adjustments may allow individuals to use assistive devices or allow them more time to complete the tasks without compromising or altering the strength of the tasks. Sometimes adjustments are in form of reducing the workload.

Vocational Skills and Work Environment

Work is a central part of adult life, consuming as much as half of our lives. 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 (Stern 2002). For a number of years, studies have reported that people with disabilities have lower work force participation rates than the general public and yet work is valued in our society (Siegel et al. 1992). These programs include instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post high school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.

Lack of transitional and vocational programs for young people with disabilities, is cited as one of the major causes of their failure to function in different work environments. Jamieson et al. (1993), recommend creating programs based on the unique characteristics and needs of the target population. In preparation, young

people with disabilities should be given the opportunity to explore the world of work; formulate questions to investigate specific careers; determine if these careers meet their personal needs, abilities and directions; test their questions in mock interviews, refine them, and try them out in formal interviews. Young people with disabilities need to be able to explain their functional limitations that might impact the transition to work. They should understand their unique way of functioning and learning, and be able to describe accommodations that mitigate the impact of their disabilities.

Preparing students for the workforce is an important role for schools or at least it should be. However, most high schools in developed countries (U.S., UK and Europe at large) emphasize college preparation, which often overshadows attention to actual workforce readiness (Beresford 2004; Berkowitz 2009). In developing countries particularly in Southern Africa, the emphasis has been on sheltered employment which yields very little mainly because non-disabled people have flooded that market as well (Charema and Johnson 2010). Although a college degree is an excellent advantage in finding a rewarding job for a great number of people, postsecondary education particularly in developing countries, is not the optimal or even possible choice for many students with disabilities. Compared to their non disabled peers, students with disabilities are more likely to experience unemployment or underemployment, lower pay, and job dissatisfaction (Berkowitz 2009). 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.

CONCLUSION

Post secondary transition plan must include measurable post secondary goals for students based on age-appropriate transition assessments related to training/education, employment and, independent living skills. Transition programs, which involve counseling, are educational and vocational for young people with disabilities,

which facilitate self-understanding, career understanding, decision-making, and self-advocacy. The focus is on young people who have just begun exploring college/university education and the world of work and have their future in it. Transition programs together with other vocational courses, are meant to help young people with disabilities develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to participate successfully in colleges/universities and the work environment. The programs are designed to be a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the student with a disability, to facilitate movement from high school to post-school activities, including college/university education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important that developing countries set up transition/counseling centers in rural areas, schools, growth points, semi-urban and farming communities. These centers would be serviced by psychologists, counselors, social workers and educational advisers. Professionals could arrange visits to colleges/universities, work environments to familiarize themselves before a commitment is made on behalf of people with disabilities. With limited industries, it is paramount that professionals network and foster relationships with industries to facilitate internships, attachments and exposure to work related experiences. Transition programs should target relevant market related skills for beneficial placement, self-employment and open market.

Southern African Countries need to develop an educational hub with information on and for students with disabilities. A team of researchers could be established in order to gather information, of current realistic figures of people with disabilities since most of the figures are estimates from World Health Organization and the United Nations (UNESCO 2000). Such a research center would feed countries with information on post secondary education, vocational training, work environment and what is available in different countries. One of the promising means of guiding students and teachers

through the maze of transition involves deploying corporate research-based technologies, search and assessment tools that can be used to identify the needs, interests, functional ability of students and the available resources, college/university course options, vocational skill training institutions in relation to the demands of the industry or market place. Developing countries could pull their resources together and fund research into the feasibility of adapting existing technology to facilitate the transition of students to post secondary education or work environment. The research findings could be launched on a web-based commercially available product in use by a team of professionals involved in transition programs, prospective universities/colleges, vocational training centres, students and parents.

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