

Preparing Students with Moderate/Severe Disabilities for Employment

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Introduction

Under United States federal law, all students are entitled to a free and appropriate education. What does this mean? With general education students the expectation in public schools is seemingly straight forward that they are preparing for college and the last four years of high school are spent meeting the graduation requirements. However, students who are in special education have a different scenario. They are guaranteed the right to attend school, but their education will vary depending upon their disability and their independent goals that are developed in a contract between the school and the parents called an Individual Educational Plan or IEP. Most moderate to severe students are destined to be on a “nonacademic” track, which means that they will not graduate with a diploma. They have the right to receive “educational services” until they are 21 and then at 22 they receive a “Certificate of Completion” for having met their IEP goals and are “aged out”; no longer qualifying for program services. Families move from a bureaucracy of “entitled services” to one of “eligibility”.

Students with moderate/severe disabilities are guaranteed within their IEP a section that is devoted to helping them to transition from entitlement to eligibility services. This section is called the Individual Transition Plan or ITP. Ideally, these students are working on life, social, and work skills that will help them to take care of themselves as independently as possible. However, for most people who are unfamiliar with this population there are questions:

- Why are we preparing students with moderate/severe disabilities for employment?
- What is the curricular sequence of preparation for employment?
- What are the common roadblocks?
- Are there any possible solutions?
- What are the ideal solutions?

This paper looks to answer these questions by looking at available research articles that have dealt with these issues in the past, as well as this author’s own past experiences working with the moderate/severely disabled in a Special Education Class for the past four years. The following is a report of those findings.

Key Factors/Research

According to an article found in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch entitled, Program Provides Work, Meaning for Disabled Students Transition, ‘Inclusion’ Offer Challenge to Many (Selbert, 1993), the author described a program that was unique in helping students with moderate/severe disabilities transition by including them in general education classes and job training three days a week. Inclusion in the general education classes allowed students the opportunities to learn such things as to interact with peers and

dressing appropriately. Working at some local businesses two times a week for a couple hours a day was the other part of the program. The goal of the program was to demonstrate that the students were “employable” upon graduation.

The article described one student, Monica, out of seven who was in this program and was severely retarded and blind. Her parents had moved all the way from Maryland just to participate in the program since they could not find any others like it at the time. The district finds employers who are willing to train the students and the district provides staff that supports the students. In Monica’s case she was found a job folding napkins in a local restaurant.

Although this article was inspiring, it pointed out that most students with moderate/severe disabilities who do not have advocates will most likely end up after high school working in a sheltered workshop. Finding work for students, even after they demonstrated the ability to perform a specific job, was a “challenge”. Finally, the article ended with a quote from the instructor that said, “Our role at Special Schools is to help them make the transition into adult life and be better prepared to live in the community.” Lacking from the article was any indication at quantifying the success of the program, or even explaining what adult life meant for the severely disabled upon graduation. No clear description was given regarding the relationship between the school program and the adult agency program that was mentioned as the students’ eventual destination.

In a second article entitled, Getting ready for a working future; system to return funds to work program for disabled (Neufeld,2006), a similar program offering summer work opportunities to the moderate/severely disabled at East Baltimore High School was found that provided transition services for 13 students out a total of 70. For 13 years the Youth Works Program, provided salaries for the students during the summer and in exchange the students picked up trash, cleaned up bathrooms and distributed lunches, milk and juice to preschool students. The school district paid the salaries of the supervisors. However, the school district decided to stop funding the supervisors’ positions and the parents and community complained.

During the interim of the dispute, parents stepped in to help provide supervision for the students’ jobs. According to the program’s operator, \$15,000 was needed to pay for four supervisors at two locations. The students worked 30 hours a week at \$6.15 per hour. Parents were frustrated that a program that demonstrated “success” was being shut down.

Success was described in one sense by the hiring of ten alumni of the summer program at the business’ linen, food service, and housekeeping departments. Another measurement of success was described by one teacher as observed improvement in their social skills and work habits. Improvement in self esteem and recognition in the value of earning money to purchase desired commodities was also cited.

One of the more comprehensive articles reviewed that was found in the International Labor Review entitled, Supported Employment: Equal opportunities for severely disabled men and women (Konig, 1991), provided many details and cited specific research and statistical data on program success in three different countries. In its look at the problems confronting employment for severely disabled, it recognized that many of the programs that were successful depended upon the following factors:

1. strong family involvement and advocacy
2. strong leadership
3. Good connections with university and other consultants
4. allocation of funds for start up costs.

Basically, in its review of programs in the United States, Italy and the United Kingdom, it found Italy's Genoa Program reported a 90% success rate in incorporating disabled individuals into the work force and keeping them there. What was remarkable about the program was that it focused on natural supports provided by the employers and family rather than professional support staff. The report also cited case studies that indicated the worse case scenario for most severely disabled people would be work in a sheltered work environment that provides below minimum wage work that is tedious and boring to the individuals. Emphasis was placed on providing the individuals with work that could provide them not just a menial routine, but also one in which they were included in a normal work place environment. As a result, changes in behaviors were documented and deemed as positive changes by the support staff.

The article reported that finding work environments for the disabled makes financial sense, because it lessens their dependence upon government help and reduces the financial burden their care places on taxpayers. It also implicated that meaningful work for the disabled can increase self esteem, reverse and change negative behavior patterns, and provide motivation to socialize with others. However, this research also pointed out the challenge of resource allocation and finding appropriate leadership.

Reflection

After reviewing the literature, it is clear that the main hurdles regarding training students with moderate/severe disabilities for employment are:

1. Resources
 - a. Financial
 - b. Opportunities for work
 - c. Personnel committed to working with this population
2. Leadership
3. A shift in paradigm and how society sees moderate/severe people in the work force
4. Stronger relationship and funding between the public school system and the Department of Rehabilitation to provide a seamless transition for the disabled

The fore mentioned hurdles need to be addressed in any future or present programs viability. Without such programs, a shift in paradigm is less likely to take place. Disabled individuals need to be in the mainstream of society if they are to have their challenges addressed, instead of being out of sight and out of the general populations mind.

Although there has been movement in including moderate and severe in the workplace over the past 20 years, there seems to be little evidence of cooperation and coordination between bureaucracies that have the same goal, such as to place and support students with moderate/severe disabilities.

More research and discussion is needed in addressing these challenges and in documenting the value of such existing programs. Just in doing the literature review for this paper, it was obvious that not much has been written on or researched about the benefits of such programs. Many of the articles reviewed here date back to the 1990's. A lack of financial resources and low pay obviously hinders the quality, viability or even the consideration of similar start up programs.

Consequences for not acting upon the recommendations and findings of these programs will continue to impact tax payers in the United States. Similar to the challenges in the California Prison System that we are presently experiencing here, we are paying millions of dollars to provide security, medical services, and food for individuals, that in many instances, isolates them and contributes to behaviors that are unhealthy and require excessive medication to sedate them and make them more manageable in group settings. According to the research, it suggests that integrating people with disabilities is not only financially practical in the long run, but more humane. Without programs that advocate for an improvement in the transition process from school to post school settings, disabled adults are more likely to be put away in group homes that support them to be more dependent than independent.

Personal Reflection

In my own personal experiences in working in a moderate/severe Special Day Class for the past four years at a high school, I have had a spectrum of realizations. When I first started out, I focused on academics and focused my class curriculum on helping the students to participate in the state assessments, however, I discovered that this was wasted in most part on students, because after being in the educational environment for 10 or 14 years, they had either developed to their maximum potential in reading, writing, and calculations, or the students were destined to transition on to a sheltered group home where they would be cared for.

I then focused on trying to meet the letter of the law and develop within the students their abilities to be as independent as possible. For example, students who could not talk would be given a dynavox, a technical device that enables electronic communication, to be able to communicate with, or students who were severely autistic would be given jobs to work and demonstrate their abilities to adapt to work routines. However, in both of these situations, I soon discovered that whatever I do in the class to help students to become more independent was wasted if there was no one on the end of the transition helping to support and maintain the skills and abilities of the students. The student with the dynavox was put into a group home that took care of him and did not utilize the technology. The student who was autistic and did not want to work was supported by his parents as being overly “stressed” and so he will not work and will remain on the support and care of his parents until they become sick or die.

Feeling frustrated and wondering about my own efficacy as a teacher, it finally took a colleague to point out to me that my work in the class did have a purpose and a positive outcome even though it may not be as ideal as I had originally wanted. She pointed out that what she had observed in my class was the wonderful outcome of students who could communicate in a variety of ways and felt comfortable in the class community we had created together. She observed that the students demonstrated appropriate behaviors and did not require medication. She told me that my goal, given the challenges of the lack of coordination/support with parents and outside agencies was to document and support the students while they were in the classroom. By caring for them and helping them to behave in a socially supported environment, I was helping them to be supported and transition into a life that did not require them to be medicated.

I still keep the bigger goals in mind and plan to try and develop coordination and support from the families and outside agencies involved, but I realize now that although I can necessarily change what happens to the students when they leave my program, I can document the changes and abilities of the students while they are in my program with the hope that others down the road will care to take notice of their potentials and humanity.

Resources

Konig, A. & R. Schalock. (1991). Supported employment: Equal opportunities for severely disabled men and women. *International Labour Review*, 130(1). As viewed December 22, 2007, at: <http://www.proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.apolloibrary.com>.

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