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Abstract

Teachers, special educators, therapists, and other professionals should begin developing a transition plan based on an individual student’s interests as early as possible. The earlier that students with disabilities can begin obtaining work experience, the more likely they are to have successful outcomes of obtaining and maintaining employment after graduation. Furthermore, it is important for the team to collaborate with the parents because parental expectations are associated with improved employment outcomes. Additionally, by focusing on students’ strengths during individualized education program meetings, goals can be created that encourage the students’ strengths and address their weaknesses. Occupational therapists (OTs) are often not fully utilized as part of transition teams for students transitioning out of high school. This is unfortunate because OTs have expertise in helping students engage in self-determination and in building goals based on that student’s strengths and preferences. Overall, students with disabilities have incredible value to offer society, and professionals should utilize these strategies to improve student employment outcomes after graduation to close the employment gap between people with disabilities and people without disabilities.
Transition to Employment for People with Disabilities:

Closing the Employment Gap

People with disabilities are valuable members of society who have specific gifts which would be well-utilized in the workforce. The primary and secondary education of students with disabilities affect these students’ post-secondary employment outcomes. For this reason, it is important to utilize the IEP to implement early work experiences, increase parental expectations, and follow a student-centered, strengths-based model. Occupational Therapists have a unique outlook on transition and are valuable members of IEP teams who can work alongside teachers to accomplish transition goals.

Disability Employment Statistics

At the time of the U.S. Census in 2010, 56.7 million people in the United States had a disability which was 18.7% of the population (Brault, 2012). The American Community Survey (ACS) estimates that in 2010, 11.9% of the U.S. population had a disability and this increased to 12.7% by 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). From 2010-2017, the percentage increased slightly, but still, the data is significantly different than the U.S. Census data. These two surveys have differing methods for data collection and differing definitions of disability which explains the discrepancy. At Messiah College, 9.9% of undergraduate students in the 2017-2018 school year reported to have a disability (A. Slody, personal communication, March 11, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Education, 11.1% of students in colleges have disabilities (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). There is a significantly lower percentage of students with disabilities that attend college than students without disabilities. For this reason, the percentage found by the U.S. Census seems more likely to accurately represent the whole population. Regardless of which data set is used, it is clear that
a significant portion of the American population has a disability, and a large portion of this group are not employed.

People with disabilities (PWDs) in the United States are not being fully utilized in the American labor force. Additionally, PWDs in the labor force have lower wages and lower job security than those without disabilities despite their ability to contribute to society in meaningful ways (Lysaght, Ouellette-Kuntz, & Lin, 2012; Sanford et al., 2011; Shur, Kruse, Blasi, & Blanck, 2009). In 2018, 19.1% of the PWDs in the U.S. were employed, compared to 65.9% of people without disabilities in the same age group. Similarly, for ages 16-24, 30.4% of PWDs were employed compared to 74% of people without disabilities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). The large gap between these statistics reveals the drastic number of PWDs who are not working for one reason or another. Eight percent of PWDs are unemployed. Although this is more than the rate for people with no disability (3.7%), this is clearly not the only or even the main reason for the gap; instead, it is the people who are not in the labor force at all that create this large gap.

The National Longitudinal Study followed students with disabilities eight years after graduation. In this study, individuals with disabilities like deaf-blindness, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, traumatic brain injuries, autism, and intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities had employment rates of 30-45% which is significantly less than the 71% general employment rate for the same age group (Sanford et al., 2011). This indicates that many people with various disabilities have difficulty gaining and maintaining employment.

**Laws Related to Transition and Employment**

The law has been adjusted to attempt to decrease this gap between the employment of typical individuals and PWDs. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination against
people with disabilities in any program, activity, or employment opportunity that is federally supported (Sections 101 and 104). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 prohibits employers from discriminating against people with disabilities; a qualified individual should be employed regardless of his/her disability status even if accommodations would be necessary, as long as these accommodations are not overly burdensome. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) provides a free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities. This includes whatever services the particular child may need to have an appropriate education. Additionally, according to IDEA, students must begin transition planning before the age of 16; however, some states require this to occur before the age of 14. This transition planning must be based on the child’s strengths and interests, and it must help a student to prepare for life after high school. Despite all of these laws that were made to help increase the opportunities for people with disabilities, there is still a significant employment gap between PWDs and people without disabilities.

In one recent Supreme Court case, Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District case, the understanding of what constitutes an appropriate education was changed. The Supreme Court decided that students must make more than de minimis progress; in fact, they should make appropriately ambitious progress (Yell & Bateman, 2017). This means that the transition team should set high expectations and create ambitious goals in order for the students to help properly prepare the student for post-secondary life.

**Importance of Early, Paid Work Experiences**

For students with disabilities, having a paid job while still in high school leads to better employment outcomes in the future (e.g. Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012; Kaya et al., 2016; Mamun, Carter, Fraker, & Timmons, 2017). For this reason, high schools need to begin
preparing their students affected by disabilities for post-graduation employment. However, it seems that these schools are not giving enough real-world work experiences because there are still discrepancies in the career outcomes between people with and without disabilities.

One of the most influential ways to close the employment gap is to provide students who have disabilities with opportunities for paid work experience in high school. Wehman et al. (2015) found that early work experience is a significant predictor for obtaining a job after secondary school. In fact, they found that PWDs who had a high school work experience are 1.40 times ($p = 0.0004$) more likely to get a job after high school than PWDs who did not have work experience in high school. Similarly, another study found a similar result; chances for employment of PWDs increased by 17% when PWDs had a work-experience two years prior to the data collection (Mamun et al., 2017). Work experience was found to be even more influential than the other important aspects: whether or not the individual attended post-secondary school, his/her comfortability using the computer, and his/her ability to navigate outside of the home (Wehman et al., 2015). Work experience is often found to be the most influential predictor of obtaining employment after high school.

Some studies have researched the importance of work experience for a more specific population. For individuals with deaf-blindness, those who had paid employment experiences were 2.96 times more likely to obtain a job after high school (Cmar, McDonnall, & Markoski, 2018). This illustrates that work experience may be especially beneficial for individuals with certain disabilities like deaf-blindness.

Interestingly, the literature agrees that un-paid work experiences do not have this same correlation with post-high school employment as paid experiences (Carter, Austin & Trainer, 2011; Cmar, McDonnall, & Markoski 2018; Mamun et al., 2017; McDonnall & O’Mally, 2012).
For example, one study found that for individuals who are visually impaired, paid work experience was a predictor of post-secondary employment: $\chi^2 (1, N=130) = 15.92, p < 0.01$. However, school-sponsored work experience did not have this same correlation: $\chi^2 (1, N = 310) = 0.14, p = 0.71$ (McDonnell & O’Mally, 2012). These results might stem from the value that a paid work experience provides an individual that an un-paid experience does not provide: the motivating and rewarding exchange of money for work which leads to feelings of value and purpose. This indicates that professionals need to help students with disabilities to find not just work experiences, but paid work experiences outside of school which will then hopefully lead to employment after high school.

Although paid work experience is a significant predictor of finding employment after high school, Cmar, McDonnall, and Markoski (2018) did not find paid employment to be one of the main factors influencing a deaf-blind individual’s likelihood to maintain a job for more than six months after graduation from high school. This may indicate that work experience is most beneficial to help an individual with deaf-blindness to obtain an initial job, but other factors are necessary to help them maintain that job. It is possible that this association is present because students who have more severe disabilities are getting school-sponsored jobs, but not paid work experience. However, it is also possible that by limiting these students to school-sponsored jobs, their potential is limited.

Research on work experience for PWDs indicates that special education teachers, vocational specialists, and other professionals involved in helping individuals with disabilities find employment in high school need to be aware of the benefit that different types of work experiences have on the individual. It is not best to help an individual obtain a short-term job that is school-sponsored. Even though this is considered work experience, this will not increase the
individual’s chances of finding a job after graduation. In this case, the work experience would just be checking a box on the IEP transition plan, but it would not actually be helping the student to transition out of high school. Instead, it would be wise to carefully select a couple paid job placements for the individual to have throughout high school, which of course requires early planning by the transition team.

IDEA in §300.320(b) states that transition goals need to be written for a student by the time they reach the age of 16. These students will be graduating between the ages of 18-21. This only allows for two to five years of preparation. For this reason, it would be helpful to begin those transition goals before the child reaches 16. This way, the student can spend time completing school-sponsored work experiences which will prepare him/her for the paid work experiences that have all the evidence of improved outcomes. Additionally, the longer the student can hold the paid work experiences, the better his/her odds of obtaining and maintaining a job after high school.

**Parental Expectations**

To close the employment gap, there also needs to be a change in the mindset and expectations of educators and employers towards the talents of people with disabilities (Lysaght et al., 2012). In the United States, much legislation has been created with the intention of eliminating discrimination against people with disabilities: Rehabilitation Act of 1973, ADA of 1990, and IDEA of 2004. However, legislation alone cannot remove discrimination; a shift in the attitude of parents, educators, and employers is necessary.

In fact, one of the main predictors of a positive transition experience is the parent’s expectation of their child’s employment potential (Wehman et al., 2015). Carter, Austin, and Trainer (2012) found that higher parental expectations for their child’s independence after
secondary school contributed to the student’s increased work experience. In this study, the children whose parents thought that their child probably or definitely would be able to support himself/herself, were 4.19 times more likely to have paid work than the students whose parents thought that their child probably or definitely would not be able to be self-supporting. This was by far the most influential family factor for increasing paid work experience (which has been shown to increase employability after high school). Furthermore, Doren, Gau, and Lindstrom (2012) found that increased parental expectations for the outcome of the following factors was correlated with an increase in those factors: graduation from high school ($t = 6.95$, $p < 0.001$), employment status ($t = 3.51$, $p = 0.004$), and postsecondary education ($t = 5.84$, $p = 0.001$).

As previously mentioned, Cmar et al. (2018) found that students with previous work experience were 2.96 times more likely to obtain employment; however, parental expectations play a role in this correlation. This study found that when parents had an increase of one point on a parental expectation scale that ranged from 2 to 8, students who had parents with high expectations were 1.59 times more likely to obtain employment. Furthermore, students whose parents scored one point higher on the parental expectations scale were 1.68 times more likely to maintain employment. For this reason, it is important for professionals to work alongside the parents to increase parents’ expectations of their child in order to increase employment outcomes.

**Strengths-Based Outlook**

One of the most effective ways to increase parental expectations and to improve student outcomes is to utilize a strengths-based outlook. Although IDEA of 2004 says that services should be “based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests”, most people do not focus on the strengths of individuals with
disabilities (Carter et al., 2015; Thoma, Bartholomew, and Scott, 2009). It is clear based on the word “disability” itself that American society focuses on the negative aspects that an impairment causes (Carter et al., 2015).

Over the last 30 years in the United States, society has been in the process of shifting from viewing PWDs according to the medical model of disability to the strengths-based model (Buntinx, 2013; Wehman, 2013). The medical model emphasizes the limitations that a disability causes, and it has the goal of helping the individual with the disability to become more typical (Buntinx, 2013). Based on evidence-based practices, the strengths-based model is becoming more prominent; however, remnants of the medical model remain in society. The goal of the strengths-based model is to improve the individual’s quality of life utilizing his or her own strengths. One example of a prominent strength-based framework is the International Classification of Functioning. This model focuses on the strengths that the individual has within the categories of body and functions and structures, activities, and participation. Once these strengths are identified, then the impairments, limitations and restrictions are considered. By looking at the individual’s functioning instead of their disability, professionals and parents can learn to see the strengths of the student. These strengths can guide the goals and direction of the student’s transition plan and future employment.

People with disabilities have strengths that make them valuable members of the workforce: dedicated, honest, resilient, self-determined, etc. (Carter et al., 2015). Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and people with disabilities—just like everyone else—should be identified by their strengths. This will help PWDs find employment opportunities that will benefit the individuals and society.
Clearly, the United States has not reached the point of emphasizing the strengths of individuals with disabilities because the gap in employment is still present. Therefore, research on the transition process for young adults with disabilities is important because this population has talents and skills that should be better utilized in our societal workforce. This will improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities and benefit the greater society with an improved workforce.

Bartholomew and Scott (2009) gave a helpful idea for understanding the importance of the strength-based model, especially in an IEP meeting: people with disabilities are just like everyone else, and no one enjoys discussing their weaknesses for an entire meeting. All good bosses both congratulate their employees on their successes and address their weaknesses. The same process should apply to the IEP meeting or any meeting regarding a PWD. PWDs have strengths, it is just a matter of recognizing those strengths, and then taking the time to have those strengths guide the goal-making and IEP process. Although this may initially take more time, it will lead to improved outcomes.

One portion of creating a strengths-based model is utilizing a student-directed approach (Thoma & Wehman, 2010). Students with disabilities were found to not have a strong understanding of their own strengths (Niemiec, Shogren, & Wehmeyer, 2017). In this study, the students took an assessment called the VIA Inventory of Strengths-Youth, and these students rated themselves lower than the average for every single characteristic. Although it would be expected for them to score themselves lower than average for characteristics related to their disability, it would not be expected for them to rate themselves lower than the average for all characteristics. Contrasting this study with the study by Carter et al. (2015), many strengths were identified for students with disabilities using The Assessment Scale for Positive Character Traits-
Developmental Disabilities (ASPeCT-DD) which was completed by the parents of PWDs. This study found that the median number of strengths for the students was 20, and everyone had at least one strength. Juxtaposing these studies, it is clear that PWDs have strengths, but the students may not recognize those strengths.

For this reason, it may be important to include goals in the IEP that allow the student to recognize his/her strengths. One possibility for the reason that students with disabilities are not aware of their strengths is because teachers and professionals are not highlighting their strengths. Implementing a strength-based model into the classroom and into therapy sessions may help students learn to recognize their strengths. Furthermore, goals regarding self-determination and identifying strengths will allow an individual to identify their strengths, making them more employable (Thoma & Wehman, 2010).

Role of the Occupational Therapist

Occupational Therapists (OTs) and other specialists have the freedom to work with students individually to help ready them for transition. For this reason, it is important for therapists to be involved in the transition process because they have more practical freedom to help students with transition goals. Sometimes, teachers feel pressured by standardized testing to focus on the academic needs of students. For this reason, non-academic skills like social skills and work experiences are sometimes not emphasized in the classroom. Although OTs would be a beneficial addition to the transition team, many OTs are not fully utilized in the school system. According to one secondary analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, only 7.5% of students from ages 19-23 received Occupational Therapy in school (Eismann et al., 2017). Kardos and White (2005) found that 30% of OTs felt that their expertise was being effectively utilized for transition planning. This shows that there is an enormous potential for
occupational therapists to involve themselves in the transition process; this will allow for students with disabilities to experience increased outcomes.

As part of the occupational therapy evaluation process of creating an occupational profile as defined by the American Occupational Therapy Association (2014), therapists ask their clients about their interests and preferences before even assessing their abilities. This allows OTs to recognize the students’ ideals, and it even encourages the students to engage in self-determination in order to report these abilities and values. OTs base all of their interventions on the occupational profile which accounts for the individual’s interests and preferences; these values of the student are essential to the IEP process according to IDEA (2004). By using the student’s preferences, therapists can help a student understand the importance of learning new skills related to the IEP goals (Majeski et al., 2018). This process also helps the student to develop self-determination skills. After the evaluation process, the OT completes an assessment process to evaluate what the individual’s strengths and weaknesses are according to research-based assessments.

 Occupational therapists are experts in helping individuals navigate a life transition. In this case, OTs help an individual with a disability to understand their strengths and navigate the transition out of high school. Part of any OT’s role which would be especially applicable in a secondary transition setting is teaching students instrumental activities of daily living (Kardos & White, 2005). Activities like learning how to find transportation, do laundry, or complete meal preparation are skills that could be important for students to learn as they are transitioning into adult life. These skills and other similar skills that OT are trained to help a client achieve may also be essential in order for an individual to maintain a job. This indicates how important and effective it is to utilize OT in the transition process. In order to be most effectively utilized, OTs
should express to IEP team members the role that they can play on the transition team (Kardos & White, 2005).

**Universal Design**

Thoma, Bartholomew, and Scott (2009) recommend using a universal design approach to transition. Universal design is a term that means that something is designed in a way that it will be accessible for everyone. For example, a curb cutout allows someone with a wheelchair to be able to go on the sidewalk, but it is also beneficial for individuals riding a bike, rolling a briefcase, etc. Universal design can also be related to transition by utilizing approaches that benefit every individual. As another example, work experience was found by Wehman and Thoma (2006) (as cited by Thoma, Bartholomew, and Scott, 2009) to increase employment outcomes for all individuals including those with and without disabilities.

One essential part of universal design applied to transition is that academic content and transition planning are tied together. Self-determination is a skill that is important to all students who are transitioning from high school to post-high school. Occupational therapists help students improve in their self-determination (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2018; Orentlicher et al., 2017). OTs can work with students on increasing their independence, and their ability to communicate with community members on their own. These skills are essential for future employability (Thoma, Bartholomew, & Scott, 2009).

**Discussion**

Utilizing these strategies in tandem allows for a greater amount of change for an individual with a disability transitioning from high school into employment. The factors of paid work experience, parental expectations, utilization of a strengths-based outlook, and utilization of OTs all affect each other. For example, utilizing more OTs in the transition process will allow
for an increased focus on student’s interests and strengths because OTs use a process of intervention that originates with these student interests. Similarly, using a strengths-based model will help the parents to recognize their son/daughter’s strengths. As the parents begin to appreciate their student’s strengths, they are more likely to have higher expectations for their son/daughter after graduation. These increased parental expectations were also shown to be correlated with the student gaining more work experience in high school (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012). Ultimately, the increased work experience has been shown to increase the chances of employment after graduation (Mamun et al., 2017; Wehman, Sima, Ketchum, West, Chan, Lueking, 2015). All of these interconnections show that even just by focusing on one of these factors, a professional could make a difference in the employment outcomes for their students. Of course, when a professional makes a change in more than one of these factors, the impact on the outcomes would be even greater; not only will the professional be specifically working on those factors, but the interconnected factors will positively influence one another leading to improved outcomes.

**Conclusion**

By implementing strength-based goals that allow for early work experiences and increase parental expectations, students will be more prepared for future employment. Effectively utilizing occupational therapists also allows for improved goals and implementation of these goals as they provide a differing perspective from the typical classroom teacher. Transition planning for individuals with IEPs has the potential to decrease or even eliminate the gap between the employment rate for PWD and people without disabilities. For this reason, therapists, teachers, and other professionals should utilize these strategies to guide the transition process, starting students on a path towards future employment success.
References


