

“Customized Transitions: Discovering the Best in Us”

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Abstract: Transitions from school to work are particularly difficult for students with cognitive disabilities. Job placements in appropriate inclusive community work settings have proven to be possible yet job retention is poor. This article focuses on using customization as a strategy for successful transitions. Six students in rural Kentucky will be receiving resources from vocational rehabilitation to create a discovery portfolio, individualized job development, and customized employment. Their transition will be part of a ten-year follow-up study that will track their employment history, inclusion in their chosen community, and asset building. Our goal is to place them in full-time employment that provides a living wage.

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Literature Review:

The discovery profile, work experiences, job development, and customized employment are a good foundation to ameliorate some the poor transition practices that currently exist in our public schools. Defur, Getzel, and Kregel (1994) analyzed transition plans from 100 students and found that vocational rehabilitation representatives rarely attended transition meetings held by local high schools and that most of the time the client was not present. Grigal, Test, Beattie, and Wood (1997) evaluated 94 individualized education plans (IEPs) from 19-20-year-old students and reported that very few had goals to develop peer interdependence, reasonable accommodations, or use of assistive technology to adapt activities. Shearin, Roessler, and Schriener, (1999) evaluated 68 high school IEPs and discovered only vague mention of goals related to interdependent living skills, transition to employment; only seven percent of the plans involved vocational rehabilitation services. Everson Zhang and Guillory (2001) sampled 329 IEPs and found that goals seldom included age-appropriate services in areas of career development, interdependent living skills, leisure skills, or medical concerns.

Powers et al. (2005) notes that transition planning, as required by federal law, is inadequate and research-based practices are not incorporated in most plans. Test et al. (2004) agrees that participation in transition planning should increase if the meetings are person-centered and suggests that universities update their curricula to prepare graduates to use research-based practices. Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, and Wood (2001) indicate that one such research-based practice is

self-determination which involves students and parents in the process.

Appropriate client involvement in the process has been a question of debate. According to Powers et al (2005), students are not actively involved and do not have the skills needed for self-determination. Martin, Marshall, Maxson, and Sale (2004) believe it is not realistic for students to participate if they are not provided instruction. There is growing evidence by Algozzine et al. (2001) and Field and Hoffman (2002) that students who have been trained in participation skills will benefit. Hardre and Reeve (2003) suggest that students who are trained in self-direction are more likely to succeed in transitioning from school to the community.

Leaderer (2007) believes that students who are appropriately involved will be better prepared for the transition to work and community living.

The term self-determination is used with different meanings in the literature. Turnbull and Turnbull (2006) report that self-determination often refers to one's ability to redirect public funds and as an instrument to negotiate individualized fiscal control. Nernay (2005) believes self-determination is about client freedom to make choices, which implies both authority and responsibility. Fortune et al. (2005) uses the same term to describe the opportunity for students to decide about selection of service providers or self-selected services. Moseley (2005) uses the term "consumer direction" to imply that students should be allowed control over finances and delivery of needed services. Self-determination has different meanings in the literature and is used to describe different activities that may prove helpful in the customized vocational rehabilitation process. Algozzine et al. (2001) believes: that the skills of self- determination can and should be taught; counselors need training to teach these

skills; students can learn to set goals and problem-solve; and not only should skill development be taught, but an environment should be created to foster self-determination.

The discovery process helps students determine goals, access resources, form interdependent relationships, and chose a career. Ryan and Deci (2000) identify three universal needs-- competence, autonomy, and relationships--which drive intrinsic motivation, self- determination, and well-being. Students develop a greater sense of self-esteem and success when they are allowed the freedom to decide goals that foster interdependent relationships, personal growth, and self-control. Dominance, goals set by others, control, extrinsic rewards, and lack of connectedness hampers well-being and self-actualization. According to Powers et al. (2005), goals related to interdependence, well-being, living skills, and leisure activities are not commonplace in transition plans. Client-led planning, client agreement on goals, the discovery process, and natural interdependent supports are also lacking.

Despite these identified needs, there is scant evidence of progress in the area of successful transitions. Mason, Field, and Sawilowsky (2004) measures attitudes toward self- determination and found that teachers were not satisfied with the level of client involvement. How do professionals meaningfully engage students and parents in transition? The current trend of teaching students to write their own goals and conduct transition meetings might be more productive if professionals helped students discover who they are, deploy strengths, provide career development, identify natural supports, use inclusive settings, foster interagency collaboration, and use customized employment.

Powers et al. (2005 p.48) identifies nine effective practices for transitioning students from school to the community. These practices include the following:

(a) client involvement in transition planning (Powers et al., 2001); (b) client participation in general education, including extracurricular activities (Sands, Bussett, Lehmann, & Spencer, 1998); (c) support for client participation in post-secondary education (Huer, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, 1994); (d) client-centered career planning and community work experience in career areas chosen by the client (Mank, 1994); (e) attention to multicultural issues in transition (Greenen, Powers, Lopez-Vasquez, & Bersani, 2003); (f) instruction in skills such as self-advocacy, independent living, and self-determination (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Martin, Mithaug, Cox, Peterson, Van Dycke, & Casth, 2003; Powers, et al., 2001; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997); (g) mentorship experiences (Powers, Sowers, & Stevens, 1995); (h) support for family involvement in transition planning and preparation (Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995; Powers, Turner, Matuszewski, Wilson, & Loesch, 1999); and (i) interagency collaboration (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999).

The Kentucky Project:

Some of these evidence-based practices are being used in a customized transition project at a rural school in Kentucky. Special education teachers and vocational rehabilitation counselors will be providing an invaluable service to students with disabilities at this school and will help them graduate with meaningful jobs. They will be providing funding for a discovery profile, job development activities, work experiences, and job placement for seniors. The process involves discovery, work exploration, a strengths-based client profile, job development, and customized employment. Possible outcomes are inclusion in society, a job with a living wage, and self-actualization. If we have succeeded with transition from school to work, the students in this project will remain in the community of their choice and remain long term in a fulfilling job that provides a living wage and full benefits.

A rural school in Kentucky is using special education and vocational rehabilitation

funds to provide work experiences and to develop the discovery profile beginning with students in middle school. Only students who are on an alternative portfolio are currently selected for this pilot project. Currently, six students have been selected to participate in the project and complete work experiences before they graduate. While attending academic classes with their peers, these students will also have carefully supervised work experiences to help them decide on a career.

A regional comprehensive university is working in collaboration with a public school to identify volunteers, parents, teachers, occupational therapists, administrators, and college professors to work in teams to take an in-depth look at each individual selected for the new pilot program. These students will be observed at school, at home, and in the community to identify their interests, contributions, and ideal working conditions. This information will be used to match their skills with local work needs and available jobs. The needs, wants, desires, and skills of a student will be matched with the needs, wants, and desires of employers. The process is designed to meet the specific needs of a student and the specific needs of employers.

During the past year, the project was designed, students were selected, volunteers and teachers were trained, the discovery process was begun, and initial work experiences were created. The current academic year will be focused on learning from the work experiences and using systematic instruction to teach work skills. Each student will rotate through several work experiences. The duration of the work experience will last only as long as the student is learning new skills. A professional will be present to provide systematic instruction, to observe learning, and to record results.

Future research plans include identifying research questions, creating an

appropriate research design, selecting appropriate instruments to collect data, analyzing the data, and reporting on the findings. Once this has been accomplished, then the foundation will be laid for writing a grant for further support of the project. Currently vocational rehabilitation, the school's special education funds, and support from the College of Education are adequate to fund the project during the next three years.

Customized Transition and Discovery:

The customized transitions process identifies skills and preference and then matches them to job tasks- one client at a time. In a rural school in Kentucky, special education and vocational rehabilitation funds will be accessed to help six students with cognitive disorders transition successfully from school to work. Vocational Rehabilitation will be reimbursing costs for a discovery profile, individualized job development, and customized job placement. Special education funds will pay for professional development and other project costs. A longitudinal by a regional comprehensive university will follow these students over the next ten years to determine success. This article attempts to explain the customized transition process, identify related literature, and suggest dichotomies that need further examination.

A discovery process is being implemented to learn about preferences and talents of students with moderate cognitive disabilities. Volunteers, parents, teachers, counselors, and college professors are working in teams to take an in-depth look at each individual student. This process is somewhat akin to an anthropological study of one person. During the discovery process the student is observed at school, at home, and in the community. Observations are done where the client can demonstrate their

best behaviors and also at a novel site. This provides a look at how the client acts doing things they really like and also how they approach an activity that they have never done before. Both give insight into employment possibilities.

Keen observation skills are needed to see the nuances that occur when the client is at a baseball game, in the classroom, at home, or at a work experience. It is important to see how they interact with the ticket office, the front gate, the crowd, the concession stand. Can they order food? Can they use money appropriately to pay for their ticket? Can they find their seat or ask for help?

Discovery allows the complex lives of students with cognitive disabilities to be explored for preferences and skills. According to Callahan (2008) employer and client needs can be met using the discovery process. The discovery process is a mechanism to get to know the client, the family, and friends. It leads to developing a keen understanding of the client's interest, needs, wants, desires, preferences, skills, likes, dislikes, and abilities. The process begins with a visit to the client's home to observe, ask questions, and record insights. A warm rapport is established with the family and client before questions are asked. The goal of the discovery process is to develop a clear holistic view of positive client traits and a future vision for their success. It clarifies critical needs and identifies the client's hopes and dreams. It is built upon the client's interests, contributions, and ideal working conditions to identify information that will help with work experiences and job placement. Specific tasks are identified to demonstrate how client vocational interests can be aligned with employer interests. According to Hansen (2005) vocational interests are the most reliable predictor of eventual career choices.

After visiting a client's home, time is arranged to observe the client at church, at a work experience, during a recreational or social event, and at school. These visits are informal observations to get to know the client as a person and record work, interaction, and communication skills. Daily living skills, personality traits, and natural supports--such as friends, family, and school peers are observed. Notes from observations are used to draw a holistic picture of a client's preferences, skills, and abilities. This clear picture leads to the discovery of job skills and available natural supports. This process considers the whole person. It goes beyond finding the person a job and getting a job coach. It is a tool used for a lifetime of successful living because it drives to the heart of the existence and spirit of the client. It answers deep philosophical questions such as, "Who am I, and why am I here? How can I contribute in a meaningful way"?

This information is recorded and presented in a portfolio. The portfolio is an approved autobiography that puts the client in the best possible light while identifying possible work supports or accommodations. For example, while observing Gina at several work experiences, in her home, in the classroom, and in the community; it was noted that she uses technology to download photos to put together a power point presentation. A small portion of her profile records the following observation:

- j. *Vocational Skills:* During free time, Gina asked for permission to work at the computer. Gina went straight to a computer, turned it on, and went to Power Point to a blank screen. Then she opened a web site that featured interstate highway photos. Gina clicked on pictures and selected copy from a drop-down menu. She then opened the Power Point program, selected a new page and pasted the picture on the page. She then centered the picture by clicking on the picture, clicking and holding the mouse button and dragging it into position, centering it on the page. She had approximately 20-25 slides in her presentation.

In addition to the discovery profile, Vocational Rehabilitation will be paying for job development. At this rural school, an occupational therapist is using the information in the profile to identify appropriate work experiences for Gina at her high school. The first work experience involved checking visitors into the school. Gina asked visitors their name and who they came to see. She typed their name into the computer and printed a name tag. A time sensitive sticker was placed on the tag and handed to the visitor to place on their shirt. Gina then gave direction to the visitor and asked them to check out when they left the building. The therapist taught Gina the job skills, observed her work, provided feedback only when necessary, and recorded her progress. This work experience lasted four weeks. Gina started a second experience as soon as she could perform the old tasks independently and there was nothing new left to learn. Gina will have a dozen work experiences before she graduates from school.

Gina's portfolio includes pictures and descriptions of work tasks that she can perform. It also includes what she has learned and what we have learned about her. This portfolio will be used to find Gina a work experience in the community, and after school job, a summer job, and eventually to find her full-time employment that she enjoys and finds meaningful. The job developer will use this portfolio to align Gina's talents and preferences with job tasks available in the community.

According to Luecking (2008) all students need work experience in high school. His research suggests that students with cognitive disabilities who have work experiences are much more likely to graduate from high school with a full-time job. The following work-related experiences: job shadowing, work exploration, self-employment, school jobs, and part-time employment. Job shadowing allows a client time with an employee

to observe their work. Work exploration is a week to six weeks of unpaid experience on a job site. Self-employment is tasks that a client does to earn money or development of a small business. School jobs are closely supervised in-school assignments. It is our goals for these six students to have a dozen work experiences and several part-time jobs before they graduate.

The discovery profile lists client preferences, skills, and abilities, and identifies potential employers in the community and natural supports. Students are asked: under what conditions could you be successful? A possible list might include the following: I want a job within five miles of my house in retail food service, or manufacturing; I prefer to work indoors, can perform fine motor tasks, and can work forty hours a week; I will not work on Sundays.

In addition to providing funding for the discovery profile and job development, Vocational Rehabilitation will be funding job placement using customized employment strategies. According to Callahan (2008) customized employment matches the needs, wants, desires, and skills of the client with the needs, wants, desires, and skills of the employer. It is a negotiation based on strengths deployment that arranges accommodations and natural supports to accomplish a niche job. It is designed to meet the specific needs of a client and the specific needs of the employer. In 2001, the US Department of Labor coined the term *customized employment*. Customized employment means individualizing the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. Rather than being based on an evaluation, assessment, or a comparison, customized employment is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs and interests of a person with a

disability and at the same time, specific needs of the employer. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, you have customized employment if you have changed, on behalf of the job seeker with the disability, essential or nonessential job responsibilities. Essential job responsibilities include job tasks that can be negotiated on behalf of a job seeker. Nonessential responsibilities can also be negotiated; things like dress, work hours, or pay. If either of those is negotiated, it is customized employment.

The primary focus of customized employment is on contribution instead of competition. The job description of an applicant with a disability is customized through voluntary negotiation with an employer. Applicants with disabilities often use job developers to assist in the negotiation of customized job descriptions. Job developers present employers with a proposal to unbundle tasks and combine jobs to create a position that fits the applicant.

Applicants voluntarily allow job developers to disclose issues concerning their disabilities as a good faith strategy to resolve support and accommodation issues. Negotiation is based on a client's potential contributions placed as a template over potential employer needs. Pay should be determined by the commensurate wage paid for the traditional job description most similar to the customized job.

Conclusion:

During this project, the following dichotomies were discovery and need further examination: No Child Left Behind (NCLB) versus functional skill preparation; school inclusion versus societal exclusion; and social security income versus employment. Let us examine each one individually. NCLB often takes students out of functional skills preparation and puts them in the regular curriculum. Functional skills training, community-based instruction, and career education disappeared as common practice when high stakes testing began. Does it make sense for a student who cannot tell the difference between a nickel and a dime to be placed in algebra? Is high stakes testing more important than authentic assessment? School inclusion often leads to societal exclusion after graduation. A student can be fully included for twelve years of academics and then graduate without a job and with little contact with the community. It is difficult to schedule a student for full inclusion in the regular curriculum and provide them with the life experiences needed to be successful in the job market. Particularly students with cognitive disabilities have a hard time competing with others for jobs. They need skills, customized employment, and sophisticated strategies to make them employable. These skills are not available in the regular classroom. How do we include students in all aspects of academics and include them in practical work experiences? Social Security Income (SSI) stands in the way of full employment. SSI insures that the vast majority of students with disabilities remain in poverty. Sliding scales for payment provide some incentive but a living wage with full benefits provides financial freedom. What strategies do we use to get students with cognitive disabilities out of the cycle of poverty? Asset procurement is one way out of poverty. Individual

Development Accounts (IDA) helps students save for the future. IDA grew out of micro-loans and provides incentives to save but how do we teach the difficult discipline of saving? How do we help students save for a home using IDA accounts?

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