



Project Empower and Employ (EMP2): An Intervention Development Study for Youth with Disabilities At-risk for Justice Involvement

The RRTC on Employment of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities is conducting six studies aimed at developing effective practices to improve employment outcomes of transition-aged youth. This plain language research brief provides an overview of Research Study #4.

The goal of this study is to develop and test an intervention called Project Empower and Employ (EMP2) for youth with disabilities at risk for justice involvement in school-based settings. We want to find out if the various career development activities offered through EMP2 help the students prepare for employment after graduation. Additionally, we want to know if EMP2 can improve their school attendance, workplace performance, and overall mental health, while reducing their likelihood of getting involved with the justice system.

Study Overview

Our study will research the implementation of EMP2 in school-based settings and its impact on career and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities at risk for justice involvement.

In this study, we will:

- Conduct focus groups with youth with disabilities at risk for justice involvement, professionals, and employers to identify key needs and inform adaptations to the EMP2 curriculum.
- Pilot the EMP2 program in school settings with small groups of eligible and interested students.

- Use person-centered, guided self-discovery activities to help students explore their strengths and career goals.
- Provide manualized, structured in-classroom training where participants can learn various soft skills and job readiness skills.
- Offer real-world work experience opportunities where participants can apply and strengthen their job skills.
- Pair students with peer mentors who offer guidance, encouragement, and support.
- Integrate strengths-based positive psychology strategies to promote student well-being and long-term success.

Research Questions

1. What adaptations should we make to the EMP2 intervention components to address the needs of youth with disabilities at risk for justice involvement?
2. How effective and manageable is the EMP2 program for students and staff in high school or alternative school settings?
3. What effect does EMP2 have on the educational and vocational outcomes, as well as juvenile and work functioning, among youth with disabilities at risk for justice involvement?

Importance of the Study

Youth with disabilities face multiple barriers to employment, including lower educational attainment, mental health issues, substance use challenges, limited job-related skills and experience, and inadequate financial and social support (Verbruggen, 2016). These challenges significantly increase their risk for involvement with the justice system. These barriers are further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted access to critical educational and employment services, exacerbating existing inequities.

Work-based learning offers significant potential for reducing these challenges among youth with disabilities (Kittelman et al., 2020). These experiences enhance job-related skills and expand professional networks and social capital—key protective factors that reduce the likelihood of justice involvement and support sustainable community integration (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Wehman et al., 2015).

This study is especially important given the ongoing gap in services for youth with disabilities at risk for justice involvement who are often underserved within transition and workforce development programs. The insights gained from this study will inform the creation of inclusive, evidence-based interventions tailored to enhance educational engagement (Sinclair et al., 2017), facilitate effective community reintegration (Mathur et al., 2021), and improve employment outcomes and quality of life for this vulnerable population.

Learn More

To learn more about this study or the other studies conducted under VCU's RRTC on Employment of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities, visit transition.vcurrtec.org.

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