



Stakeholder Perspectives on Paid Work Experiences of Youth with Disabilities

Background and Purpose

Equipping students with severe disabilities for the world of work has been the longstanding emphasis of transition education. A good job enables young people to connect to their community, to assume valued roles, to contribute to local needs, to develop friendships, to find purpose, to experience personal satisfaction, and, of course, to earn a paycheck. Adolescence is a critical period for employment preparation. Indeed, paid employment during high school is a normative experience for youth without disabilities. However, the opposite is true for students with severe disabilities¹.

Challenges

The employment trajectories of young adults with severe disabilities are often shaped in the final years of high school. Although connecting students with disabilities to paid employment before graduation is considered best practice in the field of special education transition, *very few* students with intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities have these experiences. Research suggests that only 23-30% of high school students with these disabilities had paid work experience in the past year². In fact, most high school programs stop short of paid work experiences and only provide campus-based instruction or short-term career exposure (e.g., job site visits, short-term job sampling, unpaid training). Moreover, only 15% of young adults (ages 18-21) with severe disabilities report having a paid community job³.

How do we elevate employment outcomes of young adults with severe disabilities? What steps should we take?

Study Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perspectives of critical stakeholders regarding the barriers to and facilitators of paid employment for youth and young adults with severe disabilities. In addition, we are soliciting their input on the design and delivery of an employment intervention package that connect students to meaningful jobs during their final year of high school.

Research Questions

We are exploring three primary research questions:

1. What are the barriers to paid work during high school?
2. What might facilitate access to paid work during high school?
3. How do these stakeholders conceptualize “meaningful work” during high school?

Methods

Participants

We interviewed 74 diverse stakeholders in middle Tennessee. Participants included 24 parents of young people with severe disabilities, 17 employment agency personnel (e.g., Pre-Employment Transition Services providers and Vocational Rehabilitation staff), 15 special educators, 13 employers, and 5 school district leaders. The average age of participants was 46 (range from 25 to 68). Two thirds were female and one third were non-White.

Among participating parents, their children ranged in age from 15 to 27 years ($M = 19$). Youth had a variety of disabilities, including autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disability, and multiple disabilities.

Interviews

We conducted interviews using a semi-structured protocol that addressed our three research questions. In addition, we solicited feedback on our initial ideas for an employment-focused intervention. We used a combination of individual interviews ($n = 8$ educators) and focus group interviews ($n = 16$ groups) to invite the perspectives and recommendations of participants. Interviews typically lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted more than half (58%) of our interviews using Zoom.

Results

We are in midst of analyzing data related to our primary research questions. Future briefs will explore the barriers and facilitators to paid employment, as well as the ways in which different stakeholders conceptualize employment during high school. In addition, we will develop research reports that provide more detail on our methodology and findings.

Conclusions

We are using the knowledge, experiences, and suggestions from these stakeholders to inform the development of an intervention aimed at improving the paid employment outcomes of youth with disabilities. As experts in preparing youth with disabilities for adulthood, the insights gained from each group of participants will directly inform every aspect of the intervention. In addition, we are incorporating feedback from a strong local advisory board.

This qualitative study is the first phase of a five-year intervention project evaluating the contributions of paid employment during high school to the later employment outcomes of youth with severe disabilities after graduation. We will:

- Develop an intervention package that advances the employment goals of students with severe disabilities and addresses the information and support needs of professionals and families.
- Implement a rigorous study plan to document the impact of the package on the post-high school employment outcomes of students with severe disabilities.

- Examine the ways in which this study can be expanded across classrooms, schools, and communities.
- Disseminate the packaged intervention throughout Tennessee and the United States.

References

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