JoDD
Journal on Developmental Disabilities
Volume 29 Number 1, 2024
On-Line First

Effect of a Vocational Rehabilitation Summer Program on Student Transition-planning Behaviours and Mentor Attitudes Towards People with Disabilities

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Keywords

vocational rehabilitation, transition planning, behaviours

Abstract

Prior research has indicated that students with disabilities are less likely than students in the general population to secure part-time employment during high school, receive post-secondary education, live independently, or secure competitive full-time employment after graduation. Federal law in the United States has been passed to create an environment to change this outcome. This exploratory study reviews the outcomes of a two-month long vocational support program. Using the Transition Behavior Scale, the researchers reviewed 27 (14 female/13 male) high school-aged/young adult students' (between the ages of 15-19) self-reported attitudes of their program experience. Using the Attitudes Toward Intellectual Disabilities Questionnaire, self-reported attitudes toward students with intellectual disabilities of their eight career experience mentors (all females/young adults between the ages of 18-22) in the program were assessed. While results showed some small improvements in scores from pre-test to post-test, they did not show a significant difference in any specific subscale for either the mentor or student groups. Increasing the amount of time students are in the program, extending the segment of the experience that focuses on classroom time/skill development, and analysis by workplace are recommended for future consideration.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) noted that those with disabilities, defined as long-lasting impairments that affect full societal participation, should be included and supported in the workforce (Vonholt et al., 2018). Approximately 15% of the world's population possesses some type of disability that can negatively affect present and future employment participation, especially in the globalized, high-tech economy of industrialized countries. Barriers such as poor legislation, lack of services, and harmful attitudes towards those with disabilities are workforce participation challenges for those with disabilities (World Health Organization, 2015). These barriers are found in both low- and high-income countries as unemployment rates for those with disabilities are almost double that of their peers without disabilities (Saleh & Bruyere, 2018). These barriers are also difficult to overcome, especially for those with intellectual disabilities who possess below-average cognitive functioning and deficits in adaptive developmental behaviours. Onset occurs before adulthood (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2017).

Youth are the future workforce, and globally, over 90 million children experience a disability (World Health Organization, 2015). According to a recent update, about 3% of children and youth around the world possess an intellectual disability, and prevalence increases with age (Olusanya et al., 2020). In the United States (US), students with disabilities, approximately 12%, were less likely than other students to secure part-time employment during high school (Lipscomb et al., 2017), receive post-secondary education, live independently, or secure competitive full-time employment (Cobb et al., 2013). In a longitudinal survey of post-school transition outcomes for students with disabilities, those students with intellectual disabilities were the least likely among disability categories to be successfully prepared for transition from school to work or education (Lipscomb et al., 2017).

Legislation such as the adoption of the UN Convention and other anti-discrimination in employment policies in Europe and Canada, for example, helps to promote workforce integration for those with disabilities (Vonholt et al., 2018). Because of poor employment outcomes in the US, federal legislation was passed to address the educational and future employment needs of students with disabilities. Reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in addition to mandating access to appropriate public education for students with disabilities, has emphasized a post-school transition planning process to improve future quality of life outcomes such as community living and employment (Cobb et al., 2013). For those with mild to moderate disabilities, paid employment during secondary school, as well as the teachable skills of self-knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses and self-advocacy/self-determination strategies may help to improve future employment outcomes (McConnell et al., 2012). Secondary students with disabilities, with the assistance of family, agencies, and schools, must have a school-to-work/education transition plan to help them achieve their future life goals. Students are highly encouraged to participate in their transition planning by advocating for their needs, goals, and preferences. Almost all students participate at some level in their transition planning, and most transition goals are related to education and employment (Cameto et al., 2004). It seems that those who receive education in transition planning and create a transition plan are more likely than others to receive appropriate post-secondary education supports in the future (Newman et al., 2016). For those students with intellectual disabilities, however, few were provided the opportunity to participate as leaders in their transition planning (Shogren & Plotner,

2012), and vocational rehabilitation agencies were not very actively involved in the process (Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Bouck & Joshi, 2014).

Vocational Rehabilitation and Student Transition Planning

Community-based rehabilitation, used in almost 100 countries, is a recommended strategy to provide those with disabilities access to services, including employment support. There is also a need for improved transition support from youth-to-adult and school-to-work (World Health Organization, 2015). Supported employment and job training programs, therefore, have been used successfully to promote work participation of people with disabilities in many European and Scandinavian countries (Saleh & Bruyere, 2018). In the US, vocational rehabilitation agencies, providers of training and services for supported employment and independent living, share transition planning responsibilities with students, families, and schools. In one study, when vocational rehabilitation agencies were involved in employment-related transition services and provided supported employment programs, employment rate outcomes improved, especially for youth with intellectual disabilities (Wehman et al., 2014). In an evidence review of transition studies, however, community-based vocational rehabilitation programs demonstrated mixed results for post-high school employment outcomes for youth with disabilities (Cobb et al., 2013). Types of transition strategies to teach employment skills for students with intellectual disabilities were also reviewed. Mentor feedback on job performance and community-based instruction were reported as the most common approaches. However, frequency or duration of the interventions was not reported in about half of the studies reviewed (Gilson et al., 2017). The most effective school-to-work/education transition programs possessed the following best-practice characteristics: 1. Transition plans and employment services focused on the needs and interests of the student giving student voice to decision-making and job-specific supports. 2. Interprofessional connections were made between the vocational rehabilitation agency, schools, and community partners to support service coordination. 3. The agencies provided caring mentors (Lindsay et al., 2015) to help with student confidence-building and problem-solving (Doren et al., 2013).

In addition to vocational rehabilitation training and work experience as predictors of successful post-school employment (Wehman et al., 2015), it was suggested that job-related social skills training may also improve employment outcomes for students with disabilities (Park et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017). Also, for those not old enough to secure paid employment, volunteer work provided positive, practical, work-related experiences for younger students and was recommended for inclusion in vocational rehabilitation programs (Lindsay, 2015; Miller, 2013).

Attitudes Toward Students with Intellectual Disabilities and School-to-Work Transition

Community, teacher, and support staff attitudes toward students and adults with intellectual disabilities may affect their integration and transition into the school and work worlds. In one study, community member attitudes were generally positive toward those with intellectual disabilities, more negative towards those with a more severe disability, and varied depending on disability knowledge and quantity and quality of personal interactions (Morin et al., 2012). In a study of secondary school teachers from 20 countries about their confidence in working with students with disabilities, although most were not formally trained in or taught special education

classes, many perceived high levels of efficacy in using inclusive classroom strategies (Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018). Although it was believed that interpersonal contact with those with intellectual disabilities may predict attitudes (Scior, 2011), it now seems the quality of those relationships is more strongly associated with attitudes toward those with intellectual disabilities (Keith et al., 2015). For those who work with people with disabilities, it also seems support staff attitudes toward people with cognitive disabilities influence their response actions as their clients may exhibit challenging behaviours (Willems et al., 2014). In a review, interventions to improve attitudes through contact-based interventions (e.g. volunteering, tutoring) with people with intellectual disabilities had demonstrated some, although limited, effectiveness on attitudes and empathy. In addition, there may be a dose-response effect. Up to a certain amount of contact may decrease negative, stereotyping attitudes, however, past a certain point, effects diminished, or attitudes became more negative (Seewooruttun & Scior, 2014). For college students, volunteer and service-learning interventions to influence interpersonal contact with people with disabilities also demonstrated some impact on attitudes (Lawson et al., 2017; Wozencroft et al., 2014; Fort et al., 2016).

Overall, these transitions from school to work or to post-secondary education can be difficult for students with disabilities. Complex factors affect the positive developmental process and transition to adulthood, including involvement with community and volunteer experiences, identification of personal strengths and motivations, and attitudes held by others towards people with disabilities (Stewart et al., 2013). Vocational rehabilitation agencies can use positive, strength-based transition assessments and approaches for students with intellectual disabilities to manage these factors (Carter et al., 2015). There is a need for vocational rehabilitation services that emphasize transition planning, teach job skills, and connect agencies, businesses, and other resources (Chan & Rumrill, 2016).

Purpose

Although vocational rehabilitation agencies have not been active in the transition planning process for students with intellectual disabilities (Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Bouck & Joshi, 2014), the agency in the present study conducted a paid work and transition planning experience for high school- aged students/young adults with intellectual disabilities. The purpose of this study was to assess the effect of a vocational rehabilitation summer program on student transition-planning behaviours and mentor attitudes towards people with disabilities. It was hypothesized that because the program used career experience mentors and followed recommended best practices that behaviours and attitudes would improve.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Twenty-seven high school-aged youth and young adults with intellectual disabilities were enrolled in a paid work experience summer program. To assess program effect, a study was additionally conducted, and all summer program students were invited to participate in the study.

All completed the consent form/assent and participated in the study. Participants were attendees of a two month-long paid summer work experience. The complete program included work experience at a community agency or business, a classroom educational component, and a transition-planning special event. In the group, there were 14 females (52%) and 13 males (48%), all between the ages of 15-19 (most [20/27, 74%] were aged 16-18), and all (100%) were Caucasian. To qualify for the program, participants had to possess below-average cognitive ability with limitations in one or more adaptive behaviours that could impede potential future employment.

In addition, eight college-aged career experience mentors (all (100%) females; all (100%) Caucasian; and between the ages of 18-22 years (most [5/8, 63%] were aged 20-21) guided and supervised the summer program participants each day. To assess the program's effect, a study was additionally conducted, and all career experience mentors were invited to participate in the study. All (100%) of the career experience mentors completed the consent form and participated as the experimental group in the study. The career experience mentors were recruited by the agency using job postings in the local newspaper and on their agency website. Applicants for the summer, part-time position were to have at least a high school education, college experience preferred, and an interest in working with special needs youth and young adults. All mentors hired were college students from the local area majoring in elementary education (4), undecided (1), business (2), and biology (1). None possessed any previous, formal coursework or training in special education or vocational rehabilitation. Ten college-aged Caucasian females attending summer school at a nearby university were asked to participate as a control group to only complete the written pre- and post-tests. Eight volunteered, completed the consent form, and participated as the control group in the study.

Procedure

Institutional Review Board approval (and agency administration consent, parental/guardian consent, and participant consent/assent) was granted prior to study start. During program registration, program administrators talked with students' parents/guardians before they signed the parent consent form as an additional measure to ensure student competency.

High school-aged/young adult paid work experience student participants: Before the beginning of the summer program during the first orientation meeting for all student participants, the pre-Transition Behavior Scale 3rd Edition (TBS-3) Self-Report Version (McCarney & Arthaud, 2012) was administered, including the assent form. At the post-program meeting for all student participants, the post-TBS-3 was administered. To ensure confidentiality, no names were recorded, and code numbers assigned randomly were used on the questionnaires for all student study participants.

Career experience mentors: Before the beginning of the summer program during the first orientation and administrative meeting for career experience mentors and agency administration, all experimental group mentors completed the Pre-Attitudes Toward Intellectual Disability Questionnaire (ATTID) (Morin et al., 2015) administered by the researcher. In addition, before the program start, all control participants were administered the Pre-ATTID by the researcher in a small group setting. After the last week of the program during the post-program administrative

meeting for mentors and agency administration, all mentors completed the Post-ATTID administered by the researcher. All control group participants were administered the Post-ATTID by the researcher in a small group setting. To ensure confidentiality, no names were recorded, and code numbers assigned randomly were used on the questionnaires.

Prior to program start, mentors were trained on their job requirements: transporting their paid work experience participants to their workplaces, coordinating logistics with workplace management and staff, and directly supervising and guiding each participant as they completed their job tasks. Each mentor was assigned a small group of three or four participants to supervise at the workplace. During the two month-long program and under the guidance and supervision of their career experience mentors, all paid work experience participants worked in small groups for four days each week. Job locations are seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Type of Workplace	Work Tasks	Number of paid work experience participants
Local Public Schools	Janitorial, yard maintenance,	13
Local Public Libraries	Janitorial, yard maintenance	4
Local Grocery Stores	Janitorial, stocking shelves	7
Long Term Care Facility	Janitorial, yard maintenance, food service	3

One day each week, all high school-aged/young adult paid work experience students attended a work-related social skills training designed specifically for transition-aged students with disabilities. In a classroom-style setting, agency staff conducted the "Soft Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success" curriculum (US Department of Labor, n.d., para 1). The curriculum is designed specifically for students between 14-21 years of age and deemed appropriate for young people with disabilities. The program focuses on "communication, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, networking, problem solving and critical thinking, and professionalism" (US Department of Labor, n.d., para. 1). As a special event halfway through the program, a full-day transition planning event for students was conducted by agency staff and expert guest speakers with assistance of the mentors. The morning activities included workshop-style, active-learning sessions on workplace communication and conflict resolution, business etiquette, and job-search skills. The afternoon sessions were focused on self-determination skills, self-advocacy, and a culminating job interview role play.

Instruments

The *Transition Behavior Scale 3rd Edition (TBS-3) Self-Report Version* (McCarney & Arthaud, 2012). Valid and reliable for students in transition, the tool allows for students' self-reported

measure of transition skills in three areas: "work-related", "interpersonal relations", "and social/community expectations" (McCarney & Arthaud, 2012, p. 1). Respondents rated each of the 38 questions on a scale from 0 (does not demonstrate) to 4 (demonstrates all of the time). Respondents were able to receive assistance and could complete the form over several days, if necessary.

The *Attitudes Toward Intellectual Disability Questionnaire (ATTID*) was used to measure attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities of respondents (Morin et al., 2015; Morin et al., 2013). Each item utilized a 5-point Likert scale with a separate "*I don't know option*", which was coded the same as *"Neither agree nor disagree"* (Morin et al., 2015; Morin et al., 2013). The instrument possesses a Chronbach's alpha of .92 for the total scale and between .59-.89 for five sub-scales ["Discomfort, knowledge of capacity and rights, interaction, sensitivity and tenderness, and knowledge of causes" (Morin et al., 2013, p. 274-275)] as well as test-retest reliability between .62-.83 for five sub-scales (Morin et al., 2013).

Analysis

Measures of central tendency and dispersion (mean score and standard deviation) were used to describe total survey scores and subscale scores within both the TBS-3 and ATTID. A series of paired samples *t*-tests were used to assess pre-post changes in subscales for all components of both the TBS-3 and ATTID. A Bonferroni correction was applied to limit error rates, yielding an alpha score of 0.0036

Results

High school-aged/young adult paid work experience student scores for the TBS-3 showed a numeric increase between the pre- and post-tests. However, based on the results of the paired samples *t*-tests, none of the changes were statistically significant at α=.0036 level (Table 2).

Table 2
Paired Samples t-test Results for TBS-3 Subscales

Subscale	Pre-post	n	M(SD)	t-score	df	p-value
"Work Related"	Pre	27	68.67(16.88)	-1.525	26	p=0.139
	Post	27	74.37(14.36)			
"Interpersonal Relations"	Pre	27	46.67(9.19)	-2.013	26	p=0.055
	Post	27	50.70(6.32)			
"Social/Community Expectations"	Pre	27	75.81(11.76)	-0.372	26	p=0.713
	Post	27	76.70(9.71)			
"Total Survey Score"	Pre	27	191.15(32.81)	-1.507	26	p=0.144
	Post	27	201.78(27.67)			

Note. Subscale titles derived from McCarney & Arthaud, 2012, p. 1

Examining individual subscales within the ATTID, attitudes toward knowledge of the origins of intellectual disability slightly improved within the experimental group but remained relatively the same within the control group. Similar findings were observed for attitudes pertaining to abilities of those with intellectual disabilities. Within the experimental group, scores improved from the pre-test to the post-test while scores did not improve in the control group. For participants' feelings of sensitivity and compassion, positive changes were noted within the control group, but not in the experimental group. Scores pertaining to feelings of uneasiness toward those with intellectual disabilities failed to improve in both the control and experimental groups as did scores pertaining to participants' attitudes toward positive contacts with those with intellectual disabilities. No statistically significant changes in pre-post ATTID scores were observed in the experimental and control groups for the five subscales (Tables 3 & 4).

Table 3

Paired Samples t-test Results for ATTID Subscales (Experimental Group)

Subscale	Pre-post	n	M(SD)	t-score	df	p-value
"Knowledge of Causes"	Pre	8	17.50(4.60)	0.814	7	p=0.442
	Post	8	16.38(1.85)			
"Knowledge of Capacity and Rights"	Pre	8	37.25(9.04)	0.377	7	p=0.718
	Post	8	35.25(15.19)			
"Sensitivity and Tenderness"	Pre	8	22.88(3.60)	1.214	7	p=0.264
	Post	8	21.50(1.41)			
"Discomfort"	Pre	8	77.25(6.86)	0.095	7	p=0.927
	Post	8	77.00(10.16)			
"Interaction"	Pre	8	30.38(9.05)	-0.279	7	p=0.788
	Post	8	31.50(12.92)			

Note. Subscale titles derived from Morin, Crocker, Beaulieu-Bergeron, & Caron, 2013, p. 274-275.

Table 4

Paired Samples t-test Results for ATTID Subscales (Control Group)

Subscale	Pre-post	n	M(SD)	t-score	df	p-value
"Knowledge of Causes"	Pre	8	17.63(3.20)	-1.528	7	p=0.170
	Post	8	17.88(3.27)			
"Knowledge of Capacity and Rights"	Pre	8	42.75(12.93)	-1.698	7	p=0.133
	Post	8	43.63(12.97)			
"Sensitivity and Tenderness"	Pre	8	24.75(1.39)	-0.935	7	p=0.381
	Post	8	25.25(0.89)			
"Discomfort"	Pre	8	80.00(2.78)	0.983	7	p=0.359
	Post	8	79.00(3.07)			
"Interaction"	Pre	8	33.38(5.89)	-1.504	7	p=0.176
	Post	8	36.63(8.42)			

Note. Subscale titles derived from Morin, Crocker, Beaulieu-Bergeron, & Caron, 2013, p. 274-275.

Discussion

Scores show there were no statistically significant improvements in the pre- to post- measures for either the high school-aged/young adult paid work experience students or their mentors. There were, however, small increases in student scores for each of the sub-scales ("work related," "interpersonal relations," and "social/community expectations") and total score for the TBS-3. This provides some evidence of program effectiveness in increasing job-related social skills, which was previously demonstrated to improve successful post-school employment (Park et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). In addition to possible instrument limitations, the study utilized small sample sizes of only 27 and eight, respectively. Small, positive changes in work-related social skill enhancement, although not statistically significant, may be clinically important in a program of this size. Although the Bonferroni correction is a "conservative" method for limiting type I errors, the method was used in the present study out of an abundance of caution to minimize potential false positive results (Armstrong, 2014, p. 505). However, in the absence of correction, the conclusions would have remained the same as none of the tests yielded statistically significant results at $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

Further, looking specifically at the students, the insignificant change pre- to post- may be due to the length of the program being only two months. When evaluating studies on self-determination behaviours of youth with disabilities (goal-setting skills related to achieving education and employment aims) in North America and Australia, a recent review reported that successful programs used mentoring, experiential learning, and were of longer duration (Lindsay & Varahra, 2021). However, when employment transition interventions for students with intellectual disabilities were reviewed, it was found that approximately half of reviewed programs lacked information on length of programming and duration of instruction (Gilson et al., 2017), making it difficult for comparison and to determine the best intervention frequency. It also may be due to the program format. The students were at their workplaces four days a week and in the classroom one day a week with the transition-planning event only being one day. They might have benefited from more classroom time per week and less workplace time along with a possible two-day transition-planning event. When almost 60 similar studies were reviewed, intervention formats and instructional strategies varied greatly, especially in those studies that were community-based work experiences (Gilson et al., 2017), making it difficult for comparison and to discern the most effective format. Office and custodial jobs were found to be the most common employment categories for these types of interventions for students with intellectual disabilities (Gilson et al., 2017), and the present study mirrored those categories. In future studies, it would be beneficial to look at the comparison of a student's pre- and post-test scores relative to which workplace placement. It is possible that working at a variety of locations, and learning the skills associated with each of those jobs, may play a role in improving the transition into the workforce for these individuals.

The mentor scores for subscales of the ATTID showed no significant differences for control and intervention groups. Pre-test scores for both groups of mentors were high, indicating a possible occurrence of a ceiling effect for post-test scores. It is possible these scores started high because some of the mentors may have had prior, 'informal' experience with individuals with intellectual disabilities. They may have also possessed favorable attitudes toward these individuals leading to applying for this type of job, as has been the case in previous research (Keith et al., 2015; Scior, 2011). It is recommended that programs like this continue to employ individuals who have prior

experience and enjoy working with intellectually disabled individuals. Multiple plausible explanations exist as to why statistically significant changes were not observed. The first could be due to the instruments used in the study. While the ATTID has been effectively used in previous research, the way the items in the subscales are interpreted may have impacted the total, summated scores for the subscales. For example, some may interpret feelings of pity and sorrow toward an individual with disabilities as a positive expression of feelings (e.g. empathy for the challenges they face). On the opposite end of the spectrum, feelings of pity can be viewed as negative or leading to treating the individual as a victim. Additional methods for examining attitudes toward those with intellectual disabilities should be explored. These feelings were noted in a previous study where mentors possessed reduced feelings of pity after their experiences with people with disabilities (Harrison et al., 2019). The decrease in feelings of pity occurred more significantly in those who volunteered compared to those who did not. Given the voluntary nature of mentor participation in the current study, as well as their previous experiences (i.e., they may have already had their feelings of pity reduced), this may explain why sensitivity scores remained relatively unchanged.

Although positive effects of vocational rehabilitation on employment skills for transition to the work world for those students with intellectual disabilities have been shown (Gilson et al., 2017), total program effectiveness in the present study may not be immediately measurable. Although quantitative methods are useful and appropriate for measuring changes specifically related to programmatic outcomes, the nature of such assessments may not capture the full impact of the program. Qualitative assessments may also be used to capture the breadth and depth of program outcomes, and the use thereof should be employed in future studies. Qualitative methods may be particularly useful when assessing behaviours and skills noted in the TBS-3, as these methods could provide context and examples as well as reveal thought processes that would not otherwise be possible with quantitative ratings scales (McCarney & Arthaud, 2012). Changes in job skills and job-related social skills may be beneficial as research supports the benefits of paid employment and volunteer-based programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities with respect to future employment outcomes (Lindsay et al., 2015; McConnell et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). It is important to support students and improve vocational rehabilitation experiences and, in turn, their long-term quality of life. The employment outcomes of the individuals in the current summer program are not yet known, therefore, we do not know the complete ability of this program to prepare students with intellectual disabilities for career success. Nevertheless, the present study lays a foundation upon which other researchers and program planners can build by addressing the noted limitations and exploring additional methods of measuring programmatic impact. Lastly, additional qualitative analysis may bring to light other changes that may have occurred because of this intervention for both students and mentors. It is possible there may have been changes in confidence or performance outside of the job training program that were not adequately measured as a part of this study.

Key Messages

People with disabilities: Students, become more involved in creating 'your' personal school-to-work transition plan and take advantage of summer vocational rehabilitation programs.

Professionals: Vocational rehabilitation agencies can be more active in the transition planning process for students with intellectual disabilities by offering programs like the one described in this study.

Policy makers: To see significant improvements, more time and resources are needed to support summer vocational rehabilitation programs for students with intellectual disabilities.

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