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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe transition outcomes of school-aged young adults with ASD enrolled in a university-based program that emphasizes vocational training and socialization with neuro-typical peers and adults. Although this program appears to integrate best practices for successful transition to employment, reports from parents and program alumni indicate that few graduates continue to work despite their acquired vocational and social skill repertoire. This trend supports the need for adopting a resource-based transition model to better utilize employment related resources in the family network and community.

When Job Skills Are Not Enough: Transitioning Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Sam enrolled in a campus based transition program for young adults with ASD in 2008. Sam was nineteen and in his last years of high school. His high school classroom was located on a college campus. Sam, along with his seven classmates, attended a functional academic skills class in the morning, went to the campus cafeteria for lunch and then reported to work sites for the remainder of the day. He attended physical education at the campus gym three times a week and every Friday he attended social events with his non-disabled peers throughout the campus community such as playing pool, table hockey, and video games. Sometimes public transportation was taken to attend off-campus activities such as shopping at the mall or bowling. When not attending his morning classes, Sam was fully integrated into the campus community with his non-disabled, college-aged peers. Sam had the opportunity to work on campus at several different sites. He began working in housekeeping with a peer (a college undergraduate) job coach. Soon he was moved to the human resources department where he filed, processed paperwork, and logged time sheets into the computer. He no longer needed a peer coach but worked independently with the staff of the human resources department and received accolades as to his efficiency and work ethic. His site supervisor even wrote him a letter of recommendation for future employment. During the spring semester, Sam participated in social skills training, with his non-disabled peer social coaches, focusing on appropriate topics of discussion in specific contexts (with co-workers, bosses, peers), identifying and articulating job related skills and searching for possible job opportunities that matched these skills, etc. Sam also audited a college video production class to hone his already strong technological skills. The course instructor praised his work and commented how he put more effort into his projects than some of his peers taking the course for credit. Prior to graduation, various service providers

(Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Center for Independent Living, etc.) shared information on how to access services once he graduated with Sam and his mother. In 2010, after two years, Sam graduated high school and left the program. First he attended a comprehensive rehabilitation school focused on gaining more job skill training. He only attended a few weeks as he reported: "Everyone there was bad". He sat at home for many months, sometimes coming to campus to visit current students in the program. After several more months passed, he obtained a job at a major home improvement company working in the warehouse. He was only hired for seasonal help and was laid off after the holiday. Several more months went by and fortunately, four years after graduation, he has secured employment at a major retail "big box" store. He has been one of the "lucky ones". One would think he possessed all the necessary skills to successful transition to competitive employment, as that was the goal on his individual transition plan. If programming that utilizes evidenced based practice still does not produce the positive outcomes we hope for these individuals with disabilities, what else is needed to support the transition to employment for these individuals?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a severe developmental disability characterized by an early age of onset, poor social development, impairments in language development, and rigidity in behavior. Upon reaching age 16, students' IEP's must include a transition component or Individual Transition plan (ITP) that promotes movement from school to post-school life. This component is based on individual students' needs, preferences, and interests and it identifies post-school objectives in terms of independent living, post-secondary education, vocational training, and employment. The plan may also include specialized instruction and part or full-time employment experiences that are embedded into students' daily educational routine.

Despite early implementation of transition plans, reports on post-secondary outcomes for young adults with ASD suggest that current service models may be inadequate in meeting the transition needs of these individuals in terms of postsecondary education and employment (Eaves & Ho, 2008; Newman et al., 2009; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (United States Department of Education, 2011), approximately 60% of youth identified as having some form of a disability have taken postsecondary education classes within 8 years of leaving high school compared to 67% of the general population. Of this 60%, about 44% are youth with ASD. Employment statistics are equally concerning. Individuals with ASD rank third in unemployment among disability categories, as more than 50% of young adults with ASD reported having no paid job after leaving high school (Eaves & Ho, 2008; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). Those who disclosed having been employed at one time described jobs that consisted of volunteer, sheltered, or part-time work, averaging five hours a week (Eaves & Ho, 2008; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). Additionally, 67% of the individuals with disabilities who reported paid employment, averaged 35 or more hours per week while individuals with Autism averaged 24 hours per week. According to the NLTS-2, of those employed individuals with disabilities, 13% made less than minimum wage. Individuals with autism averaged $9.20 per hour, the third lowest paid disability category (Newman et al., 2009).

In 2012, Autism Speaks convened a Think Tank meeting with stakeholders designed to develop concrete action steps to advance the national agenda to increase the meaningful employment opportunities for adults with ASD. Perspectives of parents, service providers, academic experts and individuals with ASD were shared. Individuals with ASD noted particular challenges when interviewing for employment because of limitations in: their ability to convey their qualifications; accurately read body language, eye contact, and gestures; and engage in

social banter (Autism Speaks, 2012). Similarly, the stakeholders expressed that students with ASD leave high school without: self-advocacy skills, "soft skills" such as small talk, the ability to identify their strengths, or to engage in office politics and team-oriented projects (Autism Speaks). These testimonials support the common mission of innovative secondary programming for young adults with ASD to create explicit opportunities for students to obtain authentic vocational and/or post-secondary training while in high school. Students who graduate from such programs must leave with an observable vocational skill-set, a resume with references, and appropriate workplace social skills.

The purpose of this article is to describe transition outcomes of young adults with ASD enrolled in a university-based program that emphasized vocational training and socialization with non-disabled peers and adults. Although this program appeared to integrate best practices for successful transition to employment, initial reports from parents and program alumni indicate that few graduates continue to work despite their acquired vocational and social skill repertoire. This trend supports a need to increase family understanding of available vocational resources and family-systems' adjustment to youth with ASD prior to graduation.

Overview of the Evidenced Based Practices Used for Transitioning to Employment

For more than five years, one university's special education program, school psychology program and the local educational agency (LEA) have collaborated to create a unique campus-based transition program for a small number of young adults with ASD. Individuals in their last two years of high school with goals of competitive employment and independent living participated in the program. Each year the program provided four to eight students with authentic on-campus experiences focused on evidence based transitioning practices for individuals with

ASD including functional academic skills, vocational training, and social opportunities with non-disabled peers (see Figure 1 for a summary of evidence based practices utilized).

<Insert Figure 1>

Figure 1: Sampling of Evidenced Based Practices for Transitioning Individuals with ASD

Evidence Based Practice for Individuals with Autism	**Selected Sources (listed in reference list)**	**Students with ASD Needs**	**Campus-Based Program Examples**
Transition plans that begin in early adolescence	Cimera, et al., 2013; Cobb & Alwell, 2009; Kohler & Field, 2003; Test, Fowler, et al., 2009	Active student and parent involvement, interagency collaboration, identification of the skills the student will need and instruction in those skills	OVR and related agencies were brought in to work with students, parents and the program prior to graduation
Community-based programming	Leaf, et al., 2011; Hartman, 2009; Autism Speaks, 2012; The Collaborative Work Group…(1997).	Need to be integrated in least restrictive environment with non-disabled peers	Students moved freely and independently throughout the campus community to ensure integration and inclusion
Functional Curriculum	Stichter, et al., 2007; Wehmeyer, 1995; The Collaborative Work Group…(1997).	Provide individuals with age appropriate skills and competencies that they need to function as productive workers and independent, fulfilled individuals	Life Centered Career Education Curriculum (LCCEC) was utilized in the morning classes. focused on daily living, personal social skills and occupational skills
Social skills training	Hillier, et al., 2007; Bellini, et al., 2009; Gantman, et al., 2012; Autism	"soft skills": self advocacy, small talk, the ability to identify their strengths, ability to engage in team	8-week social skills training with graduate student "peers" acting as social coaches. Skills were taught,

	Speaks, 2012; The Collaborative Work Group…(1997).	oriented projects	practiced as role-play, then practiced in real-world context
Vocational training in authentic, real-world setting	Wehman, et al., 2012; Autism Speaks, 2012; The Collaborative Work Group…(1997).	Need for meaningful and value-based employment, training that is practical and community based	Based on students' interest/skills, each student trained in job sites doing real jobs that exist on campus
Direct instruction on how to manage and monitor their workplace behavior	Wehman, et al., 2012; Autism Speaks, 2012; The Collaborative Work Group…(1997).	Job coach that is eventually faded out so individual can work independently	Undergraduate student (usually special education teaching majors) utilized as job coach that taught specific work skills and monitored students until no longer necessary
Peer mentoring and natural supports	Hillier, et al., 2007; Autism Speaks, 2012; DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002;	Students with ASD need peer models for social, job and recreational skill modeling	Peer mentors were utilized throughout the program: social activities, lunch buddies, social coaches, job coaches
"Traveling interviews"	Allen, et al., 2010; Autism Speaks, 2012	Individuals with autism often need employers to observe them performing the job	Video resumes were developed visually showing future employers the students performing on the job

Collaborative program partners included university faculty, staff, administration and students (undergraduate, graduate, doctoral), the local special education provider, local school district personnel, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), Mental Health and Mental Retardation (MH/MR) and parental advocacy groups. Each school day, the high school students attended a half-day functional academic skills class utilizing the Life Centered Career Education

Curriculum (LCCEC) on campus and then reported to pre-vocational training sites for a half-day throughout the campus community. The program provided pre-vocational training in a variety of authentic on-campus job sites such as maintenance, housekeeping, dining hall, secretarial, grounds, information technology, library, and postal services. This authentic on-the-job-training provided students natural supports to learn valuable pre-vocational and workplace social skills for future employment. After assessing both interests and skills through records review, interviews and vocational inventories, students were placed at appropriate on-campus job sites. Throughout their two years, students had the opportunity to be trained in more than one area at various locations around the campus. Generally, students were able to experience two to four job sites throughout each academic year.

Prior to placement on the job site, the classroom teacher contacted site supervisors to observe and gain insight into the vocational and social skills needed for the placement. These skills were modeled, practiced, and reinforced in the classroom prior to the first day of placements. After classroom training, students attended their job sites Monday through Thursday from 12:30 to 2:30 pm. An on-site staff supervisor and an undergraduate student peer who acted as a "job coach" supervised each student. Job coaches assisted the students daily in advocating for themselves while on the job, clarifying and modeling job tasks, overseeing proper task completion, and communicating strengths and needs to the classroom teacher and job site supervisor (See Figure 2 for various job sites and types of pre-vocational experience).

<Insert Figure 2>

Figure 2: Examples of Pre-Vocational Training Sites and Skills Learned

Campus site	**Types of Pre-Vocational Skills Learned**
Cafeteria	Wiping tables, assisting in the kitchen, washing dishes, refilling the salad bar
Housekeeping	Sweeping and mopping floors,
Grounds	Taking inventory, painting, utilizing motorized grounds equipment such as leaf blowers and lawn mowers
Mailroom	Sorting mail, distributing mail, delivering packages on campus
Information Technology	Updating the electronic weather board, scanning documents
Human Resources	Filing, data entry, payroll

Examples of various workplace social skills included: appropriately dressing for workplace (e.g. uniforms, outerwear); reporting to work on time; contacting site supervisors when unable to work; navigating the campus and work environment independently; conversing with bosses, co-workers and customers; asking questions when clarification is needed; persisting on task completion; and completing tasks accurately.

Program participants also attended social skills training during the spring semester of each year. Research demonstrates effective methods that underlie social skills interventions for students with ASD include: role-play, performance feedback, modeling, and coaching (Barton, Kinder, Casey, & Artman, 2011; Bellini & Akullian, 2007; Bellini, Benner, & Peters-Myszak, 2009; DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002; Gresham, 2002; Mesibov & Shea, 2011). The university-based program integrated these methods by utilizing school psychology graduate students to serve as "social coaches" approximately two hours weekly for a 15-week semester. The social skills training component of the program was designed to teach a broad range of social skills and increase social competence for the young adults with ASD, particularly in the workplace. Every other week, with the assistance of faculty mentors, social coaches designed and implemented

lessons focused on relevant workplace social skills. Social coaches began each lesson with a description of the skills to be taught (e.g. rapport building, addressing a co-worker or a boss, appropriate versus inappropriate workplace conversations, etc.). Following the description of the behavior, the coaches demonstrated appropriate and inappropriate models of the social skill being taught. The group was then asked to critique the role-play of the target behavior and identify which steps were demonstrated correctly. Afterwards, the students were given "homework" to complete with their social coach in order to generalize the skill to real-world application. Each social coach was required to individually meet one-on-one with an assigned student in the campus community to practice a homework assignment that emphasized the targeted skill. Social coaches worked with students to complete the homework in a variety of university settings including the work place. The "homework" was digitally recorded in short segments so that students with ASD could share with their peers as well as have a permanent product that demonstrated specific skills to future employers. On alternate weeks, the social coaches met with faculty. During these de-briefing sessions coaches designed upcoming lessons, shared concerns, and reviewed the performance and progress of the students.

Best Practice in Transitioning: Was it Enough?

Parent and program graduates were interviewed to determine if the program positively impacted employment of the participants. From the discussions, several themes emerged. These themes included: the importance of parent perception and beliefs, a need for more effective vocational training, a need to assist graduates in connecting with employers and community services post-graduation, the need to articulate and demonstrate graduate skills to parents and employers, and the need of transference of these training and skills to real world experiences.

Unfortunately, the majority of program graduates reported being unemployed. Those who were employed reported non-competitive employment, with the majority working for their parents. Graduates' reasons for unemployment included the inability to find employment, parent barriers, and waiting for approval from community agencies. Parents perceived students as being unemployed because of an inability to find employment, parent barriers, and an inability to find a job that matched the student's interests. Furthermore, the majority of graduates reported never: filling out a job application, having an interviewed for a job, or having held a job for more than three months. Parent responses viewed student experiences differently, and reported students filling out job applications previously, participating in job interviews, and having held a job for more than three months. If a graduate did interview but did not get the job, the graduate reported that they did not get the job because they did not qualify or for unknown reasons. Parents also reported not knowing the reason why or not having the qualifications. Parents were asked questions regarding their perception of employment and the employment barriers they perceive for their children. The biggest employment barriers perceived included distance from home and cooperative employers/coworkers

Participants were also asked about access of community services post-graduation. Graduates reported low use of community services. Graduates reported use of Career Link services or no use of services. The majority of graduates reported no knowledge of services available in their area. However, parents reported use of OVR services, Career Link, and MH/MR. All parent participants reported contact with services one to three times in the past three months. Half of the parents reported knowledge of services in their area and the other half reported limited knowledge.

The purpose of interviewing program graduates and parents was to obtain outcome data to assist in program planning and development. Overall, results suggest that despite having marketable job skills and a reported desire to work, the vast majority of program graduates were unemployed following graduation. Both parents and students recognized employment to be important, yet inconsistent with parental reports, graduates have not completed employment applications or attended employment interviews. Furthermore, knowledge of, and involvement with community resources designed to assist with transition services (i.e. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, CareerLink, Community Mental Health/Mental Retardation) were also described by parents and graduates to be consistently low. Given these results, parents appear to overestimate graduates' employment-seeking behavior while being disconnected to community support services. It is quite possible that these trends are moderated by the fact that parents serve as the graduates' primary source of transportation, as parents cited distance from home among the highest barrier to employment. However, an alternative explanation may be more complex and rooted in behavioral and family systems theories.

Further Considerations

Families are accustomed to receiving services for their school-age children with disabilities according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Although IDEA mandates participation of parents and collaboration across disciplines, it is a service-based model of supporting students' needs. Dunst, Trivette, and Deal. (1994) operationally define *service* as, "a specific or particular activity employed by a professional or a professional agency for rendering help or assistance to an individual or group" (141). Services are generally considered the "unit of intervention" that "professionally" based individuals provide to others. This method of providing support is narrow because it may only provide services to "certain"

individuals at the most basic level. Most importantly, the service model encourages dependency on professionals providing the service as the single sources of intervention (Dunst et al., 1994).

Since families and students become accustomed to the service-based model through years of interaction with IDEA mandated programs, they have not had the opportunity to develop the skill-set of resourcefulness that is required when attempting to navigate post-school transition. Hence, families may be waiting for an agency or professional to place their young adults in a job, rather than independently seeking employment opportunities through a personal network of friends and extended family members. Families must recognize that following graduation from IDEA mandated programs, community agencies designed to assist with transition "support", not "supplant" family resourcefulness and efforts for their children to acquire and maintain employment. As continuously indicated throughout the literature, involvement and participation of the family is critical for individuals with disabilities to successfully transition to adulthood (National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 1999; 2000; 2011). Family involvement facilitates the acquisition and retention of employment for individuals with disabilities (PACER, 1996). Families assist in transportation and offer suggestions about where the individual might secure employment. They also reinforce the individual's self-perceptions of strengths and weaknesses and enjoyable activities. Despite their potential to influence, family involvement has been minimal in the job search activities of individuals with disabilities (PACER, 1996).

Minimal family involvement erodes the potential for personal networking. Personal networking was found to be the quickest and most effective job search strategy after surveying community rehabilitation providers and independent living center according to the Center on Promoting Employment: Rehabilitation Research and Training (PACER, 1996). Personal

networking with relatives, friends, and neighbors also yielded employment with higher hourly wages and greater number of hours worked.

In addition to their history of interaction with a service-based model that results in a limited opportunity to build a skill set of resourcefulness, families may be reluctant to pursue employment for their children because of the function the disability may serve within the family structure (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005; Seligman & Darling, 2007). Parents, particularly mothers, of neuro-typical children experience stress as their child prepares to leave the home for the first time. Parents often report experiencing an "empty-nest syndrome" or not feeling needed as their child gains independence. This phenomenon may be exaggerated between parents and children diagnosed with a disability, as children require additional parental supports throughout their lifetime (Seligman & Darling, 2007). This additional parent support reinforces parents' emotional need to "parent" and parents may be reluctant to relinquish this role despite the chronological age of the children and the need for them to accomplish a new developmental task. As such at the time of transition, parents and children are forced to adopt new roles and patterns of interacting within the family system. These new roles and patterns of interacting likely generate fear and lead parents to question their purpose and children to crave the emotional connection of the past parent-child relationship rather than the new parent-adult dyad.

Families with a history of stressors and limited resources become "stuck in time" (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). They resist new developmental tasks to avoid the anxiety related to adapting their roles and communication patterns. As such when applied to transition, opportunities for employment may be inadvertently overlooked and resources within the family and community system underutilized. This pattern of response is then unknowingly reinforced by

the family's history of past interactions with a service-based model where they are dependent on a select group of professionals to render help or assistance.

Building Long-Term Capacity

Based on the data collected, families' histories of interacting with a service-based support model, and the family-systems dynamics related to transition, the program described above will work to design and implement a family resource-based model to transition programming. A resource-based model does not rely solely on a single type of professional for assistance. Instead, it facilitates mobilization of multiple formal and informal community resources to address identified needs (Dunst et al., 1994). A resource-based empowerment model also assumes that all individuals have existing capabilities; and failure to display competence is due to limited social systems to create opportunities, rather than deficits in the person (Dunst et al., 1994).

The model will link families of students with autism spectrum disorder to information and resources that will provide opportunities for post-school transition. Families and students will participate in these opportunities with a family sponsor obtained from the community. The primary role of the family sponsor will be to become familiar with the student and family. The sponsor will be present with the student and family during three workshop sessions where he or she learns about: the likes/dislikes of the each student, the student's strengths and previous vocational experiences, the vocations of immediate and extended family members, and family members, neighbors, and/or friends who might serve as employment resources. The family sponsor will then identify community connections and resources that may ultimately serve as employment sites.

Final Thoughts

The alarming post-secondary transition outcomes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder support the need for innovative programming that creates explicit opportunities for students to obtain authentic vocational and/or post-secondary training while in high school. Such programs must regularly review student progress and outcome data to guide decision-making and identify practices that require improvement. Review of the current program suggests that use of evidence-based practices to obtain job skills is not enough if students are not utilizing their acquired employment related skills post-graduation. It truly "takes a village" to transition a child to adulthood. As such, the program aims to implement a resource-based transition model prior to students' graduation. This model will provide accurate information to parents regarding transition and emphasize employment related resources in the family network and community; thus facilitating the development of sustaining self-advocacy.

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