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What Factors Contribute to Postsecondary Success for Persons with Learning Disabilities?

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STARRED PAPERS

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS FOR PERSONS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES?

THE EFFECTS OF PREREFERRAL INTERVENTION

GLADYS J. PILGRIM

MAY, 1993

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Educating students to function successfully in society has traditionally been a difficult task. The transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment is difficult for all students. However, for students with learning disabilities, this transition may be a monumental task.

According to Rau, Spooner, and Fimian (1989), high school graduates with learning disabilities fail to adapt to a work environment, and, as a result, are likely to have unsatisfactory work experiences, and job termination. Secondly, they fail to adapt to home and community environments; thus, they experience unsatisfactory relationships and daily living environments. Special education students who choose postsecondary education are confronted with new and unforeseen obstacles such as poor academic skills, poor organizational and study skills, and poor self-concept (Dalke & Schmitt, 1987).

As the skill level of many jobs rises and the academic level of postsecondary learning increases, it becomes more crucial for students with learning disabilities to raise their academic and functional skill level to the highest potential.

The transition of students with learning disabilities from school to work and other facets of community living has become a critical concern for

parents, professionals, and policy makers. However, the public schools bear the major responsibility for educating students with learning disabilities to prepare them for postsecondary success, both in the competitive work force and in postsecondary education. Federal legislation has mandated the inclusion of transition planning in a student's education plan.

This review will focus on the factors which contribute to successful postsecondary education and employment for persons with learning disabilities.

In this paper, transition is defined as the process of preparing students for post-school life and easing the adjustment from a school environment to adult living.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Prior to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Act (P.L. 94-142), most special education students were educated in self-contained classrooms. Special education programs at the elementary level were commonplace, but few school districts provided programs for students with learning disabilities at the secondary level. The curriculum was modified to include primarily remedial education. With the support of educators, parents, and legislators, more comprehensive educational programs were initiated. For example, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), passed in 1975, mandated the free and appropriate education for all handicapped children and youth. Because of the mandate to provide appropriate services for students with learning disabilities until graduation from high school or age 21, school districts undertook widespread efforts to develop secondary-level special education programs.

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1984 (P.L. 98-524) assured adequate vocational programming for individuals with handicaps and disabilities.

In 1990, P.L. 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed as an extension of P.L. 94-192, the Education of All Handicapped Act. It added the following definition of transition services:

> Transition services means a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. The coordinated set of activities shall be based upon the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests, and shall include instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991)

In recent years, public schools have become more sensitive to the needs of students with learning disabilities. Substantial changes have been implemented in the organization and delivery of educational services, ranging from preschool pre-academic skills to personal, social, and vocational skills at the high school level. Continued efforts have been made to provide appropriate instruction for students with learning disabilities in the mainstream setting, address individual student's needs in IEPs, and include vocational assessments for postsecondary planning.

Despite these efforts, individuals with learning disabilities experience great difficulty making a successful transition from high school to postsecondary education and employment. Edgar (1987) stated "Few handicapped students move from school to independent living in communities. Secondary special education programs appear to have little impact on students' adjustment to community life" (p. 555). Although there is growth in understanding and implementing instruction for students with

learning disabilities, these gains are not yet producing the academic and functional skills important to future success in postsecondary education and work experiences (Hursh, 1989).

One of the factors which prohibits postsecondary success is the number of students who fail to complete their high school education. National statistics indicate approximately 29% of all students who begin ninth grade do not graduate (deBettencourt, Zigmond, & Thornton, 1989; Edgar, 1987).

Studies have been conducted in both urban and rural settings to investigate the high school dropout rate. In an urban high school, Zigmond and Thornton (1985) found the dropout rate of students with learning disabilities, (53%), was nearly twice that of students without learning disabilities, (27%). The results of a study conducted in a semi-rural school district showed more than a 36% dropout rate for students with learning disabilities, which was nearly three times the rate of students without disabilities. The study indicated the dropout rate was not limited to a specific area--the same trends were seen in both urban and rural settings (deBettencourt et al., 1989).

A critical school-related predictor of high school dropout is failing ninth grade (deBettencourt & Zigmond, 1990). In a study of students with mild disabilities and students with no disabilities, all students who failed ninth grade also failed to complete high school (deBettencourt et al., 1989). Cohen and deBettencourt (1991) reported that students with mild handicaps who have failed at the elementary or middle school level and then fail ninth grade, often give up and drop out. Grade retention appears to increase the risk that students with disabilities will drop out of high school.

While students who are highly integrated into their school environment are not typically viewed as at risk for dropping out, those who are segregated from the general academic program may be at risk because of feelings of separation. Therefore, a clear focus for schools is to assist students with learning disabilities to become meaningfully integrated with their school environment to reduce the dropout risk. DeBettencourt and Zigmond (1990) spoke directly to the need for schools, not students, to change in order to better impact the high school retention rate of students with learning disabilities. Programs that attempt to fit the mold of traditional education must reconsider the changing nature of high school climates and the need to make creative options for students (Ryan & Price, 1992).

Zigmond (1990) advocated that secondary programs aimed at maintaining enrollment for special education students need to identify school conditions that are controllable, and therefore, alterable. Examples of alterable conditions are (a) curriculum flexibility in terms of required courses and grading systems, (b) individualized instructional approaches (including learning strategies), (c) administrative support and leadership for retention, (d) low student-teacher ratios allowing greater student contact and task engagement, and (e) provisions for alternative educational programs (Cohen & deBettencourt, 1991).

Many adults with learning disabilities have experienced problems with unemployment and underemployment. According to Edgar (1987), of those students with learning disabilities who graduate from high school, less than 15% obtain employment with a salary above minimum wage. The employment rate for learning disabilities/behavioral disabilities dropouts was 30%, while enrollment in an educational program after high school was

10%, which indicates a poor adjustment for these students. The employment status of individuals during the first two years following graduation indicated that during the first year, 82% of the students with no identified disabilities were employed, compared to 63% of the students with disabilities. In the second year, 85% of the individuals without disabilities had employment, compared to 62% of those with disabilities. Hasazi, Johnson, Jasazi, Gordon, and Hull (1989) reported students with disabilities had higher unemployment rates, lower wages, fewer fringe benefits, worked fewer hours, and had jobs requiring less skill.

At age 20, when compared to peers without learning disabilities, students who qualified for learning disabilities programs in high school (a) were lower in social status, (b) were less satisfied with employment, (c) were less satisfied with school experiences, (d) had lower aspirations for further education and training, and (e) had fewer educational plans (White et al., 1983, cited in Miller, Rzonca, & Snider, 1991).

For many individuals with learning disabilities, vocational success is impeded, not by the lack of opportunity or desire for success, but by their failure to meet the demands of the work world (Siegel & Gaylord-Ross, 1991). Limited job skills often prevent these individuals from obtaining and retaining employment. In addition, problems with self-concept, social skills, academic deficits, job maintenance skills, and job-seeking skills are major barriers to job-related success for individuals with learning disabilities. The consistent indications are that students with learning disabilities who exit high school without specific job skills, encounter an employment arena where only unattractive, entry-level jobs are available. Individuals with the lowest employment qualifications will find more competition for jobs.

Job trends in the 1990s will have a major impact on clients with learning disabilities. Brown (1989), predicted three major trends by the year 2000:

1. Higher levels of academic skills will be needed for future employees, with very few jobs available for people deficient in reading, writing and mathematics.
2. Service industries will increase and manufacturing jobs will decrease.
3. The work force will change demographically with more older workers and fewer younger workers. Women, minorities, and immigrants will become a large proportion of the work force.

In a study to assess basic skills among high school dropouts who completed only one or two years of a high school program in a learning disabilities program, and graduates who were enrolled in the program at least four years, Zigmond (1990) found their academic achievement levels to be essentially the same. Special education programs at the high school level fail in their attempts to improve the basic skills of adolescents with learning disabilities. Many students with learning disabilities enter ninth grade barely literate and leave high school with literacy skills virtually unchanged (deBettencourt et al., 1989; Zigmond & Thornton, 1985). Zigmond (1990) advocated that the following four components are essential for more effective secondary school programming for students with learning disabilities: intensive instruction in reading and mathematics; explicit instruction in survival skills; successful completion of courses required for high school graduation; and explicit planning for life after high school.

Lack of vocational success may be due in large part to a deficit in social skills. According to Cartledge (1989), follow-up studies of adults with learning disabilities have shown they frequently have many job changes which they cannot explain, that they tend to be less satisfied with their employment situation, that their jobs tend to have less social status than those of their peers without disabilities, and that they are more likely to be employed part time and receive minimal wages. While some youths with learning disabilities are highly skilled, for the most part they tend to experience lower social status, greater peer rejection, and exhibit more social skill deficits than their nonlearning disabled counterparts.

Postsecondary employment success for persons with learning disabilities depends to a large extent, upon their ability to adapt to changes in the work environment, maintain acceptable levels of work performance, and solve problems in different settings (Mithaug, Martin, & Argran, 1987).

Cartledge (1989) stated the social skill needs of individuals with learning disabilities tend to fall into the following categories:

1. Task-related behaviors (following directions, staying on task, attending, volunteering, and completing tasks).
2. Social communication skills (greeting conversing, and listening to others, and interpersonal relationships).
3. Decision-making skills (accurately perceiving personal or social situations and acting wisely).

Fourqurean, Meisgeier, Swank, and Williams (1991) conducted a study of former students with learning disabilities who graduated or dropped out of high school, to study predictors of employment success. Results of the study suggest that public schools need to make specific efforts to ensure that

students with learning disabilities graduate from high school with optimal math skills, that they experience employment while in high school, and that efforts are made to increase parental involvement.

Legislators at both the federal and state levels have begun to address the complexities of providing transitional services and appropriate secondary education to students in need. Section 626 of P.L. 98-199, "Secondary Education and Transitional Services for Handicapped Youth" was passed to address educational and employment difficulties by developing programs for secondary special education and by strengthening the transition process to postsecondary education, vocational training, competitive employment, continuing education, or adult services (Posthill & Roffman, 1991).

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984 emphasized handicapped and disadvantaged students' rights to participate in a full range of vocational education programs in the least restrictive environment. Furthermore, the act mandated that all handicapped students who enroll in vocational education are entitled to receive the following: (a) an assessment of the interests, abilities, and special needs that may affect their successful completion of a vocational education program; (b) special services, including adaptation of the curriculum instruction, equipment, and facilities; and (c) services related to guidance, counseling, and career development (Okolo & Sitlington, 1988).

When a student with learning disabilities enters ninth grade or at age 14, the focus of special education services changes from addressing exclusively in-school academic goals and remediation of skills to planning for employment or postsecondary education. A transition team, consisting of

the student, his/her parents, a transition case manager, and other appropriate personnel, is formed and continued through the student's senior year. Implementation of transition-related ideas, methods and materials, extended IEPs, appropriate social skills, and realistic goals for the student's secondary education and postsecondary options are critical for a successful transition to adult employment and living. The student should take an active role on the team, demonstrate knowledge of his or her strengths and weaknesses, make decisions about objectives to be set and experiment with accommodations while still in high school.

According to Johnson, Bruininks, and Thurlow (1987), the extent to which an adolescent with learning disabilities achieves the desired goals of employment, community living, and social and leisure opportunities is dependent upon the effectiveness of cooperative service planning and the availability of needed adult services. Achieving more effective and coordinated services must begin with a coherent policy framework that incorporates greater consistency across public programs in philosophical values, goals, standards, and practices to guide the ongoing management of the planning process and the delivery of services. Efforts in planning and provision of services through joint and cooperative efforts of schools, postsecondary educational programs, health care, and rehabilitation with social services agencies is needed.

Interpersonal skills, job-related academic skills, and specific vocational skills are critical for the successful transition of adolescents from school to work. Thus, secondary special educators must shift their focus from traditional academic instruction to vocational programming. Although the responsibility for a coordinated program between vocational and special

education rests with secondary special education teachers who work with the student, both special education and vocation education have critical roles in providing services to the adolescent with learning disabilities. Special education must provide instruction for students in job-related academic and interpersonal skills to prepare the student with learning disabilities for entry into vocational education and employment settings at the secondary and postsecondary level. Secondary special education programs can offer the following types of vocationally relevant activities: occupational awareness, exploration and basic work experience; indepth career/vocational assessment; instruction in job-related academic skills; instruction in job-related interpersonal skills; support services to other disciplines involved in vocational programming; and post-school placement and follow-up. The role of vocational educators is to provide specific vocational instruction and labor-market contacts that will ensure a higher probability of vocational success. Basic reading competency for work place manuals and other job-related tasks, mathematics requirements for task planning and completion, communication and interpersonal skills, specific on-the-job skills (measurement, use of tools, safety concerns) are critical needs to be addressed in vocational education (Okolo & Sitlington, 1986).

Zigmond (1990) identified the following four essential components in effective secondary school programming for students with learning disabilities:

1. Intensive instruction in basic skills to prepare students with learning disabilities for independence, employment flexibility and job security, reading instruction which includes decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing skills.

2. Explicit instruction in survival skills, including behavior control, teacher-pleasing behaviors (appropriate classroom behaviors) and study skills/test-taking strategies.
3. Successful completion of courses required for graduation.
4. Explicit planning for life after high school, including postsecondary education and/or employment.

While teacher-directed instruction is needed, Mithaug et al., (1987) recommended the core of a transition program should focus upon instructing students to solve problems independently in a variety of settings, with an emphasis on decision-making, independent performance, self-evaluation, and adjustments needed for future performance. Students need experience considering the task and action alternatives, specifying consequences with each alternative, and making decisions by choosing a set of tasks and a schedule for completing the work.

One model which addresses transition from school to adult life is Project Invest, sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Education (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991). With representatives located throughout the state, Project Invest is a trained resource bank of parents and professionals from adult service agencies and school districts who have received training to conduct technical assistance in various areas of transition to assist individuals with disabilities attain a successful transition from school to adult life. Areas of assistance include staff/parent training, agency coordination, community transition interagency committee development, individual transition planning, and resource utilization.

Traditionally, special education services to students with learning disabilities have focused on high school retention, graduation, and

preparation for postsecondary employment. With increased technological sophistication, an increased number of jobs require that employees have advanced training. Brown (1989) stated "Of all the new jobs that will be created by the year 2000, more than half will require some education beyond high school and almost a third will be filled by college graduates" (p. 81). Postsecondary education is an opportunity and a challenge for individuals with learning disabilities.

Students with learning disabilities who choose postsecondary education are confronted with many obstacles and find themselves unprepared in many ways. Compared to high school, the teacher-student ratio decreases dramatically. Decreased teacher-student contact, greater academic competition, more emphasis on time management and personal responsibility, and the need for self-motivation and independence are critical issues that should be confronted before students enter college (Ryan & Price, 1992). Understanding one's learning disability and how this knowledge transfers to different settings is vital to postsecondary success. Students with learning disabilities experience changes in their personal support network; they must replace family and friends with intrinsic motivation. Students move from a guided and individually instructed environment to a setting where they need to achieve on their own. Students must take responsibility for their academic needs (Dalke & Schmitt, 1987).

In addition, college students with learning disabilities may not have a clear understanding of their disability and may refuse to accept the fact that they have a learning problem. Because of their learning disability, students often assume they are not capable of succeeding in college. They do not possess the self-advocacy skills to be independent. Students with learning

disabilities are accustomed to setting short-term goals, and need to learn to deal with long-term goals when they enter college (Ness, 1989).

Federal legislation, under the accessibility guidelines of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, clearly requires that postsecondary institutions ensure the educational rights of individuals with learning disabilities (Lopez & Clyde-Snyder, 1983, cited in Beirne-Smith & Deck, 1989).

In a survey to determine the types of services provided to postsecondary students with learning disabilities in a college setting, Beirne-Smith and Deck (1989) found the following results: While parent/guardian referrals for assistance were common, the most frequently reported method of referral for assistance was student self-referral. In regard to assessment, the majority of the colleges failed to provide any written language assessment. Basic tutoring was the most frequently reported academic service provided. Other academic services included readers and note-taking assistance, computer and word processing training, remedial English and mathematics classes, and special testing arrangements. Concerns of students' nonacademic needs was significant as demonstrated through reports of referrals to other campus programs and community services, faculty/staff consultation, and individual counseling. Postsecondary faculty/staff training seemed to focus on characteristics and needs of individual students, while alternative modes of instruction to assist faculty in more individualized and appropriate classroom instruction appeared to receive less emphasis.

To facilitate transition from high school to college, Brandt and Berry (1991) emphasized planning and goal setting in three areas: (a) school

instruction, (b) the transition process, and (c) postsecondary placement. This planning process, which should begin in the ninth grade, includes formal assessments (ability and achievement) and subjective information (learning style surveys, interest and career inventories, and social/interpersonal skills observations) to help set reasonable expectations for postsecondary success. Important components of postsecondary academic preparation are remedial instruction, transferring learned skills to new situations, organization skills, learning strategies appropriate for the individual student's learning style, and service delivery which includes both short-term and long-term goals. Personal/social skill development to help students increase positive self-concept, increase social skills, and develop assertiveness techniques is critical. Monitoring a student's performance is important to offer ongoing support.

Achieving a smooth transition to postsecondary education requires careful planning, innovation and teamwork by service providers, parents, postsecondary institutions, and most importantly, the student.

In addition to planning for postsecondary education in high school and receiving help at the college and/or technical institution, the initial transition process is also critical. Most colleges offer a one or two-day orientation for incoming students. Although this limited support is usually sufficient for most students, it is often not enough for students with learning disabilities. Making changes and adjusting to new situations have been shown to be especially difficult for students with learning disabilities. One model which addresses transition from high school to college is Project ASSIST (Adult Services Supporting Instructional Survival Tactics) at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (Dalke & Schmitt, 1986). A five-week,

non-credit, post-high school/pre-college summer transition program is offered which includes diagnostic evaluations, academic reinforcement and instruction, affective support, campus awareness, support services, and strategy training. In addition, a ten-member staff works with students with learning disabilities during the school year to help them meet success. In evaluating the program, students report an improved self-concept, higher grade point averages, improved study skills development, and increased communication skills with their professors.

In addition to attaining specific academic and vocational skills which are predictors of a successful transition to postsecondary employment and education, social skills, disability self-awareness, and self-advocacy skills are crucial areas individuals with learning disabilities must address as they face the complex challenges of everyday life.

Psychosocial problems are critical hurdles in the work place, at home, in social settings, and at work. "Many professionals now believe that psychosocial skills; e.g., how adults with learning disabilities perceive themselves and, as a result, relate to others on a daily basis in their environment) is one of the single most important factors in adult life" (Ryan & Price, 1992, p. 15). Okolo and Sitlington, (1986) have suggested that social competence appears to be one of the best predictors of occupational adjustment and vocational success for individuals with learning disabilities. According to Ryan and Price (1992), low self-esteem is the single most prevalent factor in the psychosocial area for people with learning disabilities.

Because all of these skills are particularly crucial in adult life, social skills training in high school with an emphasis on transferring these skills to other situations is important. For increasing social skills to adapt to social,

academic, and vocational settings, Aune and Johnson (1992) recommended that the individual with learning disabilities participate in a support group or a formal or informal mentoring relationship that encourages the development of good communication skills, the ability to work in a group, and increased self-esteem.

One critical factor in the successful transition to postsecondary settings for an individual with learning disabilities is disability self-awareness--a clear realistic knowledge of one's own disability. Instruction and guidance by secondary special educators can aid the individual in understanding his/her disability and integrating this knowledge and its implications to academic, vocational, and personal areas of life. This knowledge becomes a powerful tool that empowers individuals with learning disabilities in social, familial, academic, and vocational areas of their lives (Ryan & Price, 1992).

A related skill which individuals with learning disabilities will need to be competitive, both academically and vocationally, is self-advocacy. For individuals with learning disabilities, self-advocacy refers to one's ability to understand his/her strengths and weaknesses and to relate this information to others while seeking modifications or support in academic or employment settings.

According to Ryan and Price (1992), disability self-awareness and advocacy skills may be the most important predictors for unlocking successful careers for adults with learning disabilities.

Chapter 3

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Being a successful and productive member of society is difficult for many individuals. For individuals with learning disabilities this task may be monumental. When the security and structure of a school setting are gone, these individuals often are overwhelmed by the tasks and challenges that face them.

Educators face an ever-growing challenge to prepare today's youth for successful experiences in postsecondary settings. Research shows that despite the efforts of educators, individuals with learning disabilities continue to have difficulties attaining success in postsecondary education, employment, and independent living.

What then are the predictors, or success factors for successful adult living for individuals with learning disabilities? Research demonstrates that an expertise in interpersonal skills, job-related academic skills, specific vocational skills, and a personal awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses are critical factors.

Secondary special education programs and emphases need to continue to adapt and grow. Curriculums must shift their focus from traditional academic instruction to functional, vocational, and independent

living tasks. Teachers must broaden their range of educational plans to include preparation for opportunities in postsecondary training, employment, and independent living. The maximum potential of each student must be considered before an effective program can be planned and monitored. The student needs to be involved as an active participant of the planning team for his/her Individual Education Program (IEP). A student's IEP should focus on service planning and service coordination with an ongoing emphasis toward postsecondary planning.

> An appropriate and effective secondary school program can fortify young people who have learning disabilities with the self-confidence and skills needed to function effectively in postsecondary education or employment, or in personal and social relationships. Our task is to organize schooling to provide opportunities for these things to happen regardless of the cost or how much change it requires of us. It is a challenging task, but it is a challenge we simply must meet. (Zigmond, 1990, p. 20)

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