SUPPORTING THE TRANSITION NEEDS OF SECONDARY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: SUGGESTED ROLES FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

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http://dx.doi.org/10.12796/caise-review.2014V2.006

This paper was accepted in August 2014.
Many school psychologists are hesitant to engage in transition planning. The author of this paper argues that these professionals can play a pivotal role in this process, given their unique set of skills. In an effort to encourage their greater involvement, career development issues are reviewed, and ways to incorporate transition activities into traditional assessment, consultation, and direct service roles are discussed.

*Keywords*: disabilities, school psychology, transition
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High school graduation is one of the most significant events in the life of a young person. Though cause for celebration, achievement of this milestone can also elicit some degree of apprehension. Halpern (1992) described the transition from high school to adulthood as “a period of floundering that occurs for at least the first several years after adolescents leave school and attempt to assume a variety of adult roles in their communities” (p. 203). For individuals with disabilities (IWD), this struggle frequently extends for several additional years, sometimes even lasting a lifetime.

Relative to the general U.S. population, IWD are known to have poorer postsecondary outcomes. Although their participation in higher education has increased in recent years, the percentage of students with disabilities enrolled still lags behind that of the overall population (Newman et al., 2011). IWD at all levels of education are also less likely to be employed than their nondisabled counterparts (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2012). Likewise, they are more likely to receive low wages (DeLeire, 2000) and fare worse with respect to residential independence (Newman et. al, 2011).

Various forms of legislation have been passed to better prepare students with disabilities for the transition from school to post-school activities. For instance, in the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (US Department for Education, 2004) requires that transition planning begin when a student is 16-years of age. IDEIA does not designate the individuals responsible for this process, but best practice stipulates a team-based approach (Levinson, 2002). Research conducted within the past three decades has shown that school psychologists are reluctant to engage in transition planning. Shepard and Hohenshil (1983) surveyed 364 school psychologists and found that they were interested in career development functions, but felt unqualified to perform them. Staab (1996) similarly found that these professionals valued transition services—yet generally felt unprepared to provide them. More recently, Lillenstein, Levinson, Sylvester and Brady (2006) found that school psychologists wished to increase their involvement in transition activities; nevertheless, most felt inadequately trained to do so. These results are particularly troubling, given that the training of school psychologists appears to best predict their participation in transition planning (Ulmer, 2005). Unfortunately, recent data suggest that graduate programs continue to offer minimal instruction in this area (Jackson, 2013).

This paper aims to encourage greater involvement of school psychologists in transition planning. With their expertise in assessment, consultation, behavioral management, and counseling, it is believed that school psychologists can contribute immensely to this process. Given practitioners’ concerns regarding their preparedness, as well as the time constraints that they frequently face, career development issues are reviewed and ways to incorporate transition activities into assessment, consultation, and direct service practices are discussed.
In this way, school psychologists may diversify their role, yet still practice in a manner consistent with their training and proficiency. Because the school psychologist’s participation is most likely to involve assessment, greatest attention is devoted to this role.

**CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

Career development involves a series of choices made over the course of a life span. It is a process of establishing a synthesis, or compromise, between self and the opportunities and limitations in the real world (Kroll, Dinklage, Lee Morley & Wilson, 1970). This process is typically described as sequentially ordered, with qualitatively distinct age-related stages (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrod & Herma, 1951).

Career development theories were largely derived from work with nondisabled populations. For this reason, and because IWD may not progress through developmental stages in a manner similar to their nondisabled peers, the relevance of existing theories to this population has been questioned (Conte, 1983). However, a separate unifying theory of career development for IWD appears improbable, given the immense diversity found within this group. A feasible alternative is the adoption of a conceptual framework that is both comprehensive in scope and sufficiently flexible to delineate the needs of this population (Lorenz, 2011).

**A CAREER DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK FOR IWD**

Beveridge, Craddock, Liezener, Stapleton and Hershenson, (2002) offered an integrative and adaptable career development framework for IWD. Drawing from a wide range of theories, this approach consists of six statuses: Imagining, iNforming, Choosing, Obtaining, Maintaining, and Exiting (forming the acronym INCOME). Use of the term statuses (as opposed to stages) denotes that progression through career tasks need not occur in an invariant sequence; a person can revisit previous statuses, or even be in multiple ones simultaneously. Tasks associated with each component of the INCOME framework are presented in Table 1. The first three statuses pertain to career activities spanning the school years and are described below.
Table 1

**INCOME Statuses and Career Development Tasks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Salient Career Development Tasks</th>
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| **Imagining** | 1. Become aware that work, occupations, or careers exist; or recognize that jobs exist of which one was previously unaware.  
2. Learn about the world-of-work.  
3. Engage in fantasy or reality-based imagining (e.g. playing teacher during childhood, daydreaming about occupational aspirations during adolescence).  
4. Begin to develop attitudes and values about work and careers.  
5. Discover why individuals work. |
| **iNforming** | 1. Gain awareness about personal competencies.  
2. Acquire information about job characteristics, requirements, and benefits.  
3. Compare personal competencies and interests with the characteristics of different careers.  
4. Identify supports and barriers to career progress.  
5. Develop career self-efficacy beliefs. |
| **Choosing** | 1. Integrate information about the self and world-of-work.  
2. Engage in career decision-making.  
3. Select an occupation or education program that fits one’s personal characteristics or needs. |
| **Obtaining** | 1. Prepare for and conduct a job search.  
2. Remain open to chance encounters that could lead to career opportunities.  
3. Obtain a job in an occupation of one’s choice or a closely related one. |
| **Maintaining** | 1. Consider the impact of one’s disability on job performance.  
2. Develop a plan for disability management.  
3. Adapt to, perform, and sustain a career. |
| **Exiting** | 1. Exit a vocational situation due to retirement, getting fired, being promoted, or voluntarily leaving to enter another work or avocational experience. |

Children first become aware that there is such a thing as work while in the Imagining status. They observe family members going to their jobs, and they learn about occupations in school, by media exposure, and through fantasy play (Ginzberg et al., 1951). Through such social learning opportunities (Bandura, 1997) they begin to form attitudes and values about work and occupations. Over time they come to discover that people work for both monetary...
reasons and as a matter of self-concept (Super, 1980). During the iNforming status, greater self-knowledge is acquired (e.g., interests, abilities, and interpersonal skills) based on experience and feedback from the environment. Information is also gathered about job characteristics and requirements, as well as career-related supports and barriers. In turn, career self-efficacy and outcome expectations develop, which influence what career information is given serious consideration (Lent, Hackett & Brown, 1999). Acquired knowledge about the self and the world-of-work are then integrated during the Choosing status. Career decision-making commences (Peterson, Sampson & Reardon, 1991). Several vocational options are considered; some are discarded through a process of compromise (Gottfredson, 1981), and a few that best match the person’s interests, competencies, and work goals are retained. A choice is ultimately made, however tentative, about an occupation or educational program that provides a strong person-environment fit (Holland, 1997) or satisfies the individual’s needs (Maslow, 1987).

The INCOME conceptualization is purported to be culturally inclusive as well as disability-sensitive (Hershenson, 2005). However, practitioners should be aware that the theories subsuming this framework were developed in the West. As such, this approach will likely require adaptation and modifications before being applied to other cultural contexts. For instance, the Choosing tasks represented in Table 1, though suitable to individualistic cultures, may be less relevant in environments that emphasize relationalism and family obligation over personal interests.

**CAREER DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES OF IWD**

Career development for IWD is often complex and erratic due to their functional impairments. Many also struggle to meet the aforementioned status objectives because of limited career-related experiences, fewer opportunities to develop decision-making skills, and a negative self-view (Curnow, 1989). Relative to their peers, adolescents with disabilities tend to be less knowledgeable about the world of work (Rojewski, 1993) and have greater difficulty assessing their abilities and disabilities (Hitchings & Retish, 2000). Moreover, they are less confident in their ability to make career-related decisions, have lower career outcome expectations, and often display poorer job-related social skills (Bullis, Nishioka-Evans, Fredericks & Davis, 1993; Ochs & Roessler, 2001). Sadly, without significant support, postsecondary success will elude many of these young adults. Equipped with a basic understanding of career development theory, we now turn to specific transition roles for school psychologists, beginning with assessment.

**ASSESSMENT ROLES**

School psychology assessments serve different purposes depending on the student’s developmental level. Evaluations completed during the elementary school years focus on identifying learning and adjustment problems, whereas high school assessments frequently
consist of routine re-evaluations designed to track progress and determine whether special education eligibility continues to be met. However, if secondary school psychologists wish to contribute substantively to transition planning, then their assessments must serve a broader function. Several factors should be considered, including: (a) the relevance of psycho-educational data for transition planning, (b) whether to supplement traditional evaluations with transition-specific measures and techniques, and (c) the eligibility requirements of postsecondary supports and programs.

THE RELEVANCE OF PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL DATA

Much of the information required for transition planning is contained in psycho-educational evaluations. Achievement results can inform team members about whether students possess the academic skills necessary for higher education, vocational training, or entry-level employment. Similarly, because general intelligence (g) predicts the educational and occupational level an individual is likely to master (McClelland, 1994; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004), cognitive assessment data can also be useful in identifying suitable post-school goals. Of course, recommendations should never be made on the sole basis of standardized test results without also considering other relevant factors (e.g., motivation, grades, etc.).

Specific abilities should also be examined to promote an exploration of jobs—at a given occupational level—consistent with student strengths. As summarized in Table 2, several abilities are associated with success in various occupations.
Table 2

**Abilities Associated with Success in Selected Occupations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abilities</th>
<th>Sample Occupations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fluid Reasoning</td>
<td>Pathologist, mechanic, statistician, engineer, judge, and mathematician.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension-Knowledge</td>
<td>Lawyer, manager, reporter, professor, poet, and soldier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual-Spatial Ability</td>
<td>Drafter, artist, mechanic, engineer, carpenter, and taxi driver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing Speed</td>
<td>Office clerk, accountant, typist, telephone operator, proofreader, and inspector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-Term Storage and Retrieval</td>
<td>Product designer, scientist, inventor, playwright, architect, and interior designer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Knowledge</td>
<td>Mathematician, repairperson, physicist, accountant, cashier, and bank teller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychomotor Abilities</td>
<td>Surgeon, electronics assembler, manicurist, mechanic, carpenter, and jeweler.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Ability</td>
<td>Administrator, author, speech writer, research scientist, editor, and judge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Table sources include: Dawis (1994), Fleishman & Reilly (2008), and Gardner (1994).

Readers will observe that the same skill (e.g., quantitative knowledge) may be required for jobs at markedly different educational levels (e.g., mathematician vs. repairperson). Although consensus has yet to be reached about the mean scores needed for satisfactory performance in particular careers, resources such as O*NET OnLine (http://online.onetcenter.org/) can be useful in this regard. Noteworthy is that the extant literature indicates that \( g \) explains most of the variance in job performance, particularly for highly complex occupations (Schmidt & Hunter, 2004). Thus, effective performance usually necessitates an integration of multiple competencies. Specific ability data are also useful in identifying skills that may hinder or enhance post-secondary functioning. For example, comprehension-knowledge deficits may contribute to poor job performance because of their impact on a worker’s understanding of task instructions (Faas & D’Alonzo, 1990). By contrast, individuals with fluid reasoning strengths may learn work routines quickly and show intuitiveness when presented with novel job tasks.

Data collected about social-emotional and adaptive behavior functioning are equally relevant to transition planning. Strong interpersonal skills among IWD, for example, are highly valued by employers (Ju, Zhang & Pacha, 2012) and are associated with good work habits and higher rates of employment (Benz, Yovanoff & Doren, 1997; Pinkney, Murray & Lind, 2012). Further, certain behavior patterns and personality attributes tend to predict success in life. These include: conscientiousness, perseverance, goal-setting, internal locus of control,
problem-solving, and agreeableness (Barrick, Mount & Judge, 2001; Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind & Herman, 2003; Lindstrom, Doren & Miesch, 2011; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). By contrast, emotional ‘dysregulation’ is associated with a number of negative outcomes, including poor work performance, job dissatisfaction, and workplace deviance (Barrick et al., 2001; Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt & Barrick, 2004; Judge, Heller & Mount, 2002). Lastly, students exiting high school with well-developed life skills appear more likely to obtain employment and achieve independence (Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering & Kohler, 2009). Additional research is needed in this area, however.

TRANSITION-SPECIFIC MEASURES AND TECHNIQUES

School psychologists can further broaden their role by adding transition-specific methods and measures to their assessment repertoires. Interviews can be expanded to include questions about career aspirations, work habits, and self-awareness. It is also important to assess past work experience, as IWD who have worked for pay during high school are up to 5 times more likely to be engaged in post-school employment (Rabren, Dunn & Chambers, 2002). When assessing mild-to-moderately disabled students, evaluations can be supplemented with aptitude and interest measures specifically designed for vocational purposes. Examples include the Occupational Aptitude Survey and Interest Schedule—Third Edition (OASIS-3; Parker, 2002) and Career Key (Jones, 2013). Most instruments are operationalized based on Western theories, thus introducing the possibility of culture-based bias when used in other geographic regions. However, several tools, including Career Key, have been validated with Non-Western populations (e.g., Ting, 2009; Yang, Lance & Hui, 2006). When selecting an instrument, practitioners are advised to carefully consider its relevance in view of an examinee’s unique cultural background and experience.

For students with severe disabilities, traditional vocational tests may not prove meaningful. Instead, manifest interests, aptitudes, and work habits should be assessed in real or simulated work situations. School psychologists can contribute by observing student behavior in work settings, and by helping to design rating forms used to track progress. They might also employ a measure such as the Becker Work Adjustment Profile – Second Edition (Becker, 2005), which assesses the nontechnical competencies required for performing all jobs (e.g., work habits). Both English and Chinese versions are available (Li & Tsang, 2002). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the many other instruments and methods suitable to IWD, interested readers are referred to Levinson (2004).

POST-SECONDARY SUPPORTS AND PROGRAMS

Many students will require support after high school. For some, only short-term help will be needed, whereas others will require lifelong assistance. School psychologists should be familiar with the post-secondary supports available in their respective regions, as well as how psycho-educational results relate to eligibility requirements. For instance, in the United
States, IWD attending higher education may be eligible for reasonable accommodations under the auspices of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (United States Department of Justice and Civil Rights, n.d). Accommodations, such as audio-recorded lectures, allow for equal access to educational programs without changing their core requirements. Since documentation is needed to receive accommodations, school psychologists should provide graduating students with up-to-date, comprehensive evaluations that plainly describe their needs and functional limitations (Joyce & Grapin, 2012). Moderately disabled individuals who are unable to pursue higher education may instead be eligible for vocational rehabilitation services (e.g., job placement assistance). Psycho-educational results are routinely reviewed to determine service eligibility, employment accommodations, and potential job placements. Therefore, reports including a vocational interpretation of data will have greater utility than those written solely for special education purposes. Lastly, individuals with developmental disabilities will likely need the greatest level of service after high school. In the United States, the Office of Developmental Disabilities coordinates an array of adult services, including recreation programs, residential services, and long-term employment support. Again, school psychologists play a pivotal role in helping young adults access these supports, as eligibility is based in part on the results of intelligence and adaptive behavior testing.

**CONSULTATION AND DIRECT SERVICE ROLES**

Additional contributions to transition planning can be made by way of consultation with families and professionals, and through direct intervention. School psychologists can educate families about transition planning, post-secondary services, and the legal rights of IWD. They might also counsel them about ways to promote self-sufficiency and career development. Parents could be encouraged, for example, to provide children with opportunities for choice making (e.g., deciding where the family should go for dinner), self-advocacy (e.g., making requests from salespeople) and personal responsibility (e.g., keeping an appointment book). Likewise, career development could be fostered by delegating appropriate household responsibilities to adolescents, expecting that they obtain part-time employment after a certain age, and engaging them in supportive discussions concerning career aspirations.

Consultation with school professionals could involve informing them about evidence-based practices, including teaching self-determination, vocational training, and work-study experiences (Test, Fowler et al., 2009; Test, Mazzotti et al., 2009). Additionally, transition-relevant psycho-educational results should be clearly communicated to teachers so that specific weaknesses (e.g., comprehension-knowledge deficits) can be addressed through targeted interventions (e.g., job-specific vocabulary building). School psychologists might also consult with vocational educators about specialized instructional methods, such as using video modeling to teach job tasks (Kellems & Morningstar, 2012). At times they may collaborate with professionals outside of the school setting. Practitioners can confer with employers about student progress in work-study programs and, when indicated, help address
work-related behavior problems. In addition, discussions with representatives of outside agencies will help determine a student’s fit with post-secondary education or job-training programs.

School psychologists are uniquely qualified to facilitate student movement through certain informing status objectives. At a minimum, direct service roles should include: educating students about their disability, engaging them in discussions about its impact on post-school adjustment, providing feedback about strengths, and helping students generate reasonable post-secondary accommodations. Practitioners are also encouraged—perhaps in collaboration with guidance professionals—to assist students with additional career development tasks, including identifying job preferences, exploring the world of work, and relating personal competencies to the requirements of different careers. To further improve the odds of a successful transition, skills needed to successfully navigate post-school settings should be specifically targeted (e.g., self-management, self-advocacy, job-related social skills, etc.). School psychologists should also consider the impact of dysfunctional cognition on student motivation and vocational development. Self-efficacy and an internal locus of control can be cultivated by drawing explicit connections between their efforts and ensuing outcomes, whereas self-acceptance can be taught by reminding students that their disability, though a significant part of them, never defines their worth as individuals.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Transition planning clearly calls for a collaborative effort, and the school psychologist can play a key part in this process. For this to occur, practitioners must diversify their role to some extent. Fortunately, with a basic appreciation of career development theory, many transition activities can be easily incorporated into familiar school psychology practices. It is this author’s hope that school psychologists will come away from this article feeling better prepared to engage in transition planning. Their increased commitment to this process will surely help yield more successful post-secondary outcomes for IWD.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/088572889301600104


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