

ASSESSING THE VOCATIONAL ADAPTIVITY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
WITH MILD COGNITIVE AND INTELLECTUAL DEFICITS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss vocational preparation needs of high school students with mild cognitive and intellectual deficits, provide a general overview of how Project ADAPT, a program funded by the U.S. Department of Education is addressing these needs, and to specifically detail the steps and procedures involved in the assessment phase of this project. Much of the information presented in this paper is based on experience in implementing a three phase model program in five Wisconsin cities. Project ADAPT, is being conducted by the Research and Training Center of the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Background Information

An abundance of literature suggests that significant difficulties are encountered by students with disabling conditions who are attempting to enter the labor market. The United States Department of Education (Bell, 1983) estimated that of the approximately 625,000 handicapped youth who leave the country's school systems annually, have some type of disability. It has been well documented in the research literature that these students have unemployment problems that surpass those of their nondisabled peers. Bowe (1980) suggests that the unemployment rate for this population is in excess of 50%. Gill (1984) presented data which supported this assumption. Another study by Mithaug and Horiuchi (1983) found that only 31% of the students surveyed after graduation were unemployed, but 43% of those who were employed earned less than \$3.00 per hour.

Some other interesting facts regarding this population are that:

1. Only 10% of the students with disabilities are served by the state/federal VR system (Will, 1984).
2. Only 30% of school age youth with disabilities receive employment related instruction (Hippolitus, 1982).
3. Vocational rehabilitation (VR) is not an entitlement program, therefore some, especially those with mild disabilities, may not be served.
4. Teachers are frequently not acquainted with post school program options (Edgar, Horton & Maddox, 1984), thus are unprepared to suggest employment options to graduating seniors.
5. Many of the students with mild disabilities experience the same employment difficulties as their more severely disabled peers (Thomas, 1985).

In light of these observations, it is clear that programs for the assessment of the special education student's readiness to enter the working world should be a charge of the schools. Since a small percentage of students are served by the state-federal VR system, VR should be viewed as a resource to the school, rather than as the chief party responsible for this process. Employment Readiness Training (or job seeking skills as it is sometimes called) should be an integral part of the curriculum for students who are likely to benefit from this instruction, especially those who must conduct their own job search following graduation. Finally, teachers must be provided with the resources, the time, and training necessary to initiate and maintain an employment preparation program for students with disabilities well in advance of their anticipated graduation.

A common erroneous assumption regarding students with disabilities is that the have significant intellectual deficits, obvious physical impairments, or severe emotional problems. The fact is, a majority of these students present with

difficulties which may be considered as mild intellectual and cognitive deficits. This population is comprised of students who may have a specific learning disability (SLD), function in the mild range of mental retardation (EMR), or have some type of attention deficit disorder (ADD) which may characterize them as being emotionally disturbed or behaviorally noncompliant (ED). The majority of the students with disabilities described in the previously mentioned studies include individuals with mild disabilities (Bowe, 1980; Mithaug and Horiuchi, 1983; Gill, 1984).

Students with mild intellectual and cognitive deficits, tend to exhibit similar problems related to employment, educational and related issues, that impact on their work potential. These issues include the following:

1. Significant academic difficulties frequently exist, which in turn necessitates special treatment and therefore the stigma of being in special classes.

2. Social/interpersonal awkwardness is exhibited, due to certain intellectual and other cognitive deficits which tend to interact with the emotional related issues associated with being somehow different from other students.

3. Because students and their families see themselves as more "normal" than not, they tend not to seek out special employment services after leaving school.

4. For students who do need special employment assistance, they may be ineligible for services, since their disabilities may appear minimal.

5. Work histories tend to be limited or non-existent.

6. Relatively poor skills in searching for jobs and participating in interviews is exhibited.

7. For those who do obtain employment, one of the main reasons for termination, is that poor social-adaptive behaviors are displayed.

8. If early patterns of unemployment are encountered, the possibility of breaking that pattern becomes increasingly difficult, due to problems of learned helplessness and habitual unemployment.

Reviewing this list of characteristics points out the negative factors which are influencing the unemployment statistics reflected upon earlier. It is also interesting to note that there are many positive aspects in support of specialized vocationally oriented school programs for these students, which tend to minimize the employment related difficulties. For example:

1. Early work experiences tend to optimize the chance for lifelong employment patterns.

2. Many of the vocationally maladaptive patterns exhibited by these students can be eliminated or minimized by early identification and intervention while still in school.

3. Many vocationally adaptive behaviors can be enhanced and developed by work and life experiences, and if given the opportunity, many of these current LD, ADD, and EMR students can lead normal work lives and be absorbed without stigma into the competitive workforce.

4. Classes in job seeking skills will significantly increase not only the student's ability to locate and be hired for work, but will also enhance their ability to keep a job if hired.

5. Effective job search strategies learned in a job seeking skills class can be fostered and improved through a teacher assisted, structured job search which applies the skills learned in the class.

6. For students not capable of immediate competitive employment, involvement in public sector work experience programs such as those sponsored by a Job Training Partnership Agency, Youth Experience Program or a supported employment project will provide valuable work references and experience, and will foster the development of good work skills.

7. For students with more intense vocational needs, the types of training and graduated work experiences available in rehabilitation facilities can assist in adjusting the person to work and harden the skills necessary for independent competitive employment.

8. Finally, all of these efforts can be initiated while the student is still in school, and they can be incorporated as an integral part of the special education curriculum.

Definition of Terms

Vocational adaptivity, for the purpose of this article, will be defined as the ability of the student to adapt to the demands of the working world. This includes being able to:

1. Identify realistic goals and delimiters. Job delimiters are defined as the limitations that the student imposes upon the types of job that he or she is willing to accept, such as distance that the student is willing to travel to work, the hours that they are willing to work, and the minimum acceptable income level.

2. Search for work, either independently or with the assistance of a reliable other. This job search entails systematically searching the community for employment, interviewing for jobs and providing adequate correspondence as necessary. The use of the telephone is an integral part of this process.

3. Maintain a job when hired by demonstrating adequate work skills and social adaptive behaviors.

Employment Readiness Assessment is defined as the process of identifying the students' ability to function adequately in each of the three areas specified as components of vocational adaptivity.

Overview of the Components of Project ADAPT

Project ADAPT is comprised of three separate program elements. These elements include the Employment Readiness Assessment, Employment Readiness Training, and a Structured Job Search.

Employment Readiness Assessment is a process used to examine the students' ability to gain and maintain a job in the competitive labor market. The students' strengths and weaknesses are assessed in terms of ability to make vocational decisions, exhibit adequate job search and interviewing skills, display acceptable work related skills in the targeted area of employment, and to demonstrate appropriate interpersonal behaviors.

Employment Readiness Training, the second component of Project ADAPT, is designed to increase the students' ability to gain and maintain

employment by teaching effective job search methods, interviewing skills, telephone search skills, and job keeping behaviors. Deficit areas identified in phase one are specifically targeted for remediation in this phase.

The Structured Job Search component is composed of employment related activities near the end of the project. These activities involve the student in canvassing the community to identify prospective employers, and contacting employers to set up meeting times to review employment applications or participating in actual job interviews if possible. Practicing the skills that have been learned in the job seeking skills class is the critical element being reinforced during this phase. Even if the student's goals involve further education or training before looking for a job, the student is encouraged to search for employment, in order to complete a final assessment of job search strategies and skills.

The Process of Employment Readiness Assessment (ERA)

The first step in the ERA process involves a review of the student's cumulative educational file. This is done to document vocationally related information that currently exists. Functional skills in math, reading, readily observable work skills, potential problem areas, and potential work skills to develop through skill training are examined. Rather than providing standardized scores as descriptors of academic or other abilities, a functional description of each is provided. For example, rather than stating that the student has a 6.5 math level, the teacher will specifically detail the skills that are available, and those that are deficit, to give a better understanding of a person's specific skills. Whenever possible, this is related to the student's targeted job goals.

A family interview is the next step in the ERA process. This meeting is arranged to encourage family members to participate in developing important vocationally related behaviors for the student and to solicit support for job tryouts, assistance in the job search process, and finalizing referrals to the state vocational rehabilitation agency (VR).

The Decision-Making Interview (DMI), a standardized interview procedure which assesses the student's ability to make employment related decisions, is the next step in the ERA. The DMI focuses on assessing the student's desire for work and ability to make an appropriate job choice; current job knowledge; and the readiness to make occupational choices on the basis of job knowledge. For students who are undecided about vocational goals and alternatives, occupational exploration is encouraged, and the assessment is interrupted until realistic, immediate, and long term goals are identified, with at least one alternative job goal in each of these two areas.

After realistic job goals are identified, the job seeking skills assessment is initiated. This begins by having the student identify a particular job in the community for which they would like to interview. The employment readiness assessment coordinator, generally the special education teacher, will ask the student to participate in a

mock telephone interview, in which the student will attempt to acquire information about a company in general and the targeted job in specific. A number of critical telephone use skills are evaluated. Feedback on these issues are subsequently provided to the student. The use of an outline of topics to cover while on the telephone, and ability to clearly and efficiently state the reason for the call are examples of behaviors that are rated.

Next, the student is asked to participate in a mock job interview. Whenever possible, the interview is arranged so that the student will actually go to a business establishment for the interview. The teacher is asked to contact the employer prior to the interview to review the protocol to be followed and to explain the interview skills rating scale. Teachers are asked to role-play the interview with the student if an employer willing to conduct the interview is not found, or if a practice session is deemed necessary prior to the employer's interview.

Next, another interview is conducted by the teacher to examine the student's job search strategies. As with the mock job interview, this interview follows a standard procedure with each student. Methods of tracking job leads, scheduling interviews, arranging transportation to the job, etc. are some of the variables assessed.

Situational Assessments

Students in Project ADAPT participate in two types of situational assessments to examine their interpersonal skills, specific work related skills (e.g., timeliness, ability to perform tasks), as well as their ability to interact with supervisors, and receive criticism and work instructions. Since such a "work tryout" may be a new experience for some students, the first situational assessment is set up within the school. Generally the school based assessments are unpaid work tasks, which may involve an activity related to the student's vocational interest. This may include a placement in the school's office area, cafeteria, maintenance area, or possibly a special project within one of the vocational education areas. The nature of the task is not as important as the fact that the student is observed in a work setting. The main purpose of this assessment is to provide a school based assessment of the student's work related abilities in order to anticipate problems that may occur on a community-based situational assessment. Supervisor rating forms are filled out and feedback is given to the teacher and student regarding this part of the assessment.

A situational assessment in a community-based worksite is the final step in the ERA process. These situational assessment worksites are generally established in an area of the student's chief vocational interest, using whatever resources are available in the school and community to set up, carry out and pay for this assessment. In this part of the program, strong encouragement is given to pay a minimum wage for the hours worked in order to give the student an opportunity to earn a paycheck. It is recommended that this assessment last from 40-80 hours, with 40 hours being the minimum time desirable for observing work skills and providing a reliable estimate of the person's work adaptability.

Some of the sites involved in Project ADAPT use monies from the state VR agency, others use funds from other community resources to pay these wages. One school site used the local rehabilitation facility to set up the community-based work sites. The facility then provided a job coach and supervision as necessary, under the authorization of the state VR agency. Regardless of how the situational assessment is arranged, a supervisor's rating form is completed by the employer with the assistance of the ERA coordinator.

The Assessment Report and Staffing

At the conclusion of the ERA, a report is compiled by the ERA coordinator and a staffing with parents and community service agencies is arranged. The information collected during the three interviews (telephone, mock job interview and DMI), the school-based and community-based situational assessments, and information from the file review is presented in the report. On the basis of the findings documented in the report, the appropriateness of the student's goals are evaluated. A problem oriented plan is then developed, identifying the chief problems to overcome in order to achieve a successful transition to the targeted job goals. These problem areas are addressed in the remaining sections of the student's involvement with the project, and the report is periodically updated as problems to employment are eliminated, compensated for or worked around. Although not implied in the process, the student's goals for immediate living arrangements are frequently explored at this time as well.

When the job seeking skills and structured job search phases are completed, the student's performance in all areas is again assessed to determine progress. An update to the assessment report is then completed, so that a report of the student's specific employment readiness is on file if needed at a future date. The final step in the program is completed when linkages to all necessary community services identified in the problem oriented transition plan are made. Follow-up is encouraged throughout the summer, with a yearly follow-up for the following 3-5 years recommended. These yearly follow-up provide a data base of outcome statistics, and serve as an information and referral service for students needing further services.

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