

A Study of the Influence of Vocational Evaluation on the Career Progress
of 268 Special Education High School Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide documentation, over a three year period, of the influence of a Vocational Evaluation program on the subsequent career progress of Special Education students of the Richmond Unified School District in California. The files of 268 high school students, predominantly 10th, 11th, and 12th grades from 1984 through 1986 were reviewed for documentation in 1) Evaluation Recommendations, involving students completing recommended training programs vs. students not completing such training; also students subsequently employed or in continued education related to recommendations and training; 2) Independent Outcomes, involving students completing unrecommended training programs vs. students not completing such training; also students subsequently employed or in continued education unrelated to Evaluation recommendations; 3) Prognosis, involving the relationship of Evaluation Prognosis to subsequent success factors of training and/or employment; and 4) Implications for improvement in utilization of the Vocational Evaluation services. A significantly positive relationship was established in the training and later employment success of those students who followed one or more of the Evaluation recommendations; and conversely, a significantly negative relationship was established for those students who ignored such recommendations and specific non-recommendations. A high correspondence existed between those students who exhibited inappropriate behavior and attitudes and who were later dropped from their training programs for such reasons. It was also discovered that a substantial proportion of the students under review did not continue their vocational preparation in any readily identified activity, making it difficult to track their progress. A graduated prevocational assessment program, beginning in the 7th or 8th grade, to establish goals and needs, with a yearly tracking in order to involve the teachers with a systematic work-related plan to build skills, awareness and motivation for each student's later training and work experience, would address these issues and has been successful in other comprehensive Evaluation facilities.

Vocational Evaluation in the public schools is the subject of much interest, activity, and concern today. Many new programs are being established, and many new Evaluators are being drawn into this relatively new sector. With all the discussion of systems, procedures, qualifications, and funding, too little has been heard of the track record or follow-up to document the actual impact on future vocational development.

The purpose of this study was to provide one such documentation, over a three year period, of the influence of a Vocational Evaluation program on the subsequent career progress of Special Education students of the Richmond Unified School District in California.

The Richmond Unified School District is one of the leading districts in the State of California in providing vocational services to the mildly, moderately and severely handicapped students, and has been the recipient of several Federal and State grant awards for innovative practices and research.

It is a large urban school district with an enrollment of nearly 30,000 students, of whom 60% are minorities and approximately 560 are handicapped (in any one year). The District includes six high schools, and in the Richmond High School where the Vocational Evaluation Unit is located, 92% of the families are on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (A.F.D.C.). The handicapped children in this school have not only their own disability to cope with, but also a prevalent welfare syndrome and a lack of role models.

For this study, the files of 268 high school students, predominantly 10th, 11th, and 12th grades from 1984 through 1986 were reviewed for documentation in the following areas:

1. Evaluation Recommendations: Students completing recommended training programs vs. students not completing such training; also students subsequently employed or in continued education related to recommendations and training.
2. Independent Outcomes: Students completing unrecommended training programs vs. students not completing such programs; also students subsequently employed or in continued education unrelated to Evaluation recommendations.
3. Prognosis: The relationship of Evaluation prognosis to subsequent success factors of training and/or employment.
4. Implications: The implications for improvement in utilization of the Vocational Evaluation services.

Evaluation Recommendations. It should be noted at the outset, that of the total 268 students under review, 74% (199) entered training programs and 26% (69) did not. Of 151 students who entered recommended training programs, 91% (137) completed such programs, and 9% (14) did not. This excellent record is due in large part to an academic support program for the Learning Disabled students in such training. Of those 137 students who successfully completed recommended training programs, however, only 40 were subsequently employed or continued college programs in the area of their high school training.

Independent Outcomes. Of 48 students who entered training programs not included in their Evaluation recommendations, 29 completed such programs and 19 did not, indicating a less likely outcome with independent choice. However, 117 students were subsequently employed or continued in a college program unrelated to any of the Evaluation recommendations.

These outcomes would substantiate the validity of the Evaluation process for purposes of training selection, but suggest that the job market is not ready, at least in this area, to receive many of those students successfully trained in certain fields; and also that college programs may frequently be selected without realistic vocational goals.

Prognosis. Of 164 students with a strong positive prognosis based on skills, aptitudes and abilities, only 95 showed successful completion of a training program with subsequent employment or college continuation, indicating a loss of vocational potential and productivity.

In other comparisons, of the total student population reviewed (268), 62% entered and completed training programs, 12% entered and were dropped from such programs, and 26% showed no further activity at all. Of the 12% who entered programs and were dropped, the majority were considered behavior and attendance problems which had been noted in their Evaluation Report and also on their Referral Forms. The significance of the 26% who showed no further activity, as well as the 12% who dropped out, will be discussed under Implications and Discussion.

Implications. In spite of the accurate identification of skills, aptitudes and abilities, and the availability of appropriate training programs or work experience opportunities, too many of the Special Education students are unable to take advantage of their vocational resources. They are unprepared to receive the information and assistance at the time when some actions and decisions are required, and

because they do not continue their vocational preparation in any readily identified activity, it is difficult to track their progress.

This "high risk" group, destined for possible drop-out or oblivion, might be more carefully screened before scheduling, and administered a shorter alternative Evaluation designed to identify not only their skills, aptitudes and interests in terms of training, but also their social skills and work readiness. In this way, some might have their training deferred, and be put into a plan of pre-vocational development which would increase their motivation and chance for later success.

A graduated pre-vocational assessment program, beginning in the 7th or 8th grade, to establish goals and needs, with a periodic tracking in order to involve the teachers with a systematic work-related plan to build skills, awareness and motivation for each student's later training and work experience would address these issues, and has been successful in other comprehensive Evaluation facilities.

Discussion. One such model is the Career Assessment and Placement Center in Whittier, California (California State Department of Education, 1983) which employs a team approach of Educational, Vocational, and Rehabilitation personnel to assist their Special Education students in identifying realistic vocational goals and to implement brief job or training site work tryouts to explore interests and vocational needs. The value of such realistic exposure has been stated by other researchers (Rudrud, Ferrara, Wendelgass, & Markve, 1986) in developing vocational knowledge and preferences. The importance of involving the vocational services of the State Department of Rehabilitation (VR) has also been well described (Johnson & Atkins, 1987) in the transition process from school to the world of work. A study of vocational evaluation in the public schools of Virginia (Scott & Prezioso, 1986) emphasizes the need for work adjustment or remedial services for some students, as identified by their instructors as well as by the Evaluation process, before they can become successful in actual training or placement situations.

Dr. Donn E. Brolin, Professor of Education at the University of Missouri at Columbia, has set forth in thoughtful detail the plan, execution and rationale for a graduated three-step vocational development program commencing in the elementary grades, proceeding through junior high school, and leading up to a complete, comprehensive Vocational Evaluation at the high school level (Brolin, 1986).

In summary, the success of a Vocational Evaluation program for Special Education students is not in the use of computers to generate more detailed Reports, although they may assist; it's not really in the extending or shortening of the specific assessment itself, although undue haste can make waste; and it's not in the success or failure of any one commercial Evaluation system. It is in the degree of motivation and awareness the students are able to bring into this situation, so that they can hear, understand, and carry forward the information and recommendations they receive.

This motivation and awareness can not be built on the eve of their scheduled attendance. It requires a calculated progressive program of thought stimulation, skill development, and work exposure, with periodic check points to track each student's growth and needs in the progress toward establishing realistic vocational goals. It also needs the coordination of Vocational, Educational, and Rehabilitation services to do the job successfully.

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