

Abstract

A summer supported employment program was provided by a vocational rehabilitation agency to prepare transition-aged youth with intellectual disabilities for the workforce. This study examined the views of youth with intellectual disabilities on their pre-post-program work readiness and job satisfaction, using a survey methodology. Although youths seemed satisfied with their jobs, they reported no significant change in their perceived job readiness, and their job coaches reported similar perceptions.

As a summer program, the duration may not have been adequate to increase youths' views on their work readiness. For summer supported employment programs, obtaining youth participant insights and feedback, although sometimes a challenging task, can assist in making program refinements.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities, work readiness, youth, vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, job satisfaction

Work Readiness and Job Satisfaction of Youth with Intellectual Disabilities Participating in a Supported Employment Program

Although employment rates of adults with intellectual disabilities have increased over the years, they are not commensurate with the rates for those without disabilities. Only one-quarter is employed in some type of integrated setting, such as supported or competitive employment, which has been shown to positively impact inclusion and quality of life (Almalky, 2020). Supported employment assists people with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining jobs. In community-based workplaces, employees are provided with job training, coaching, and natural and technological support to help them move toward competitive employment (Wehman et al., 2018). Research-based, person-centered planning in supported employment, which includes job coach support for those with intellectual disabilities, has been shown to be cost-effective over time for both employees and taxpayers (Taylor et al., 2021).

Transition-aged youth with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, mirror the employment challenges of adults with disabilities, as they have lower employment rates than their peers without disabilities. Due to social skills and cognitive concerns as well as family attitudes discouraging community-based work, many lack work experience (Noel et al., 2017). School-to-work transition services through school and community vocational rehabilitation programs provide supported employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. Skills training and community-based work experiences supported by on-the-job-coaching attempts to provide youth with disabilities with academic and employment skills to improve their post-school life. Job matching and on-the-job training hope to eventually fade as the youth become more independent. Additional services are provided to help with job maintenance (Wehman et al., 2018), including the key factors of work readiness and job satisfaction.

Work Readiness

Work readiness, possessing not only technical job skills but also social and relationship skills (Lee et al., 2022), is part of transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. Schools are required to provide these school-to-work transition services for students with disabilities, and students seeking future employment participate in meeting their post-graduation goals. The overall employment and independent living outcomes for these types of programs have been demonstrated to be generally positive for youth with disabilities (Rooney-Kron & Dymond, 2022). In addition, work experiences or internships conducted prior to high school graduation for youth with disabilities have been shown to promote future employment. Best practice programs include intensive training and learning job readiness and social skills on the job with some added classwork. Job coaches also support hands-on experiences and assist in relationship building with employers (Wehman et al., 2018). In a review of environment-related contributors to the employment of people with intellectual disabilities, the use of a job coach to match employer to employee work needs, connect agencies, prospective employers, and employees, and assist with on-the-job training was noted as a significant factor in obtaining and maintaining employment of people with intellectual disabilities (Ellenkamp et al., 2016).

Specifically, for youths with intellectual disabilities, a scoping review described that one-to two-thirds participated in paid work or summer work, most worked in entry-level or service jobs, job coaches provided frequent support for paid work and summer work, and those with on-the-job support were more likely to maintain their jobs. Post-high school outcomes, specifically for paid work and summer work experiences, include higher rates of employment and better quality of life (Rooney-Kron & Dymond, 2022). Jobsite training, coaching, and continued

support improve the chances of future competitive employment for this population (Kregel et al., 2020).

School-to-work transition services attempt to assist youth with disabilities in becoming work- or career-ready. With the recent school-based focus on college and career readiness for all students, youth with disabilities also need to be work- or career-ready (Monahan et al., 2020). Transition programs for vocational training and community-based work experiences can meet this need. For example, a transition program for youth with disabilities that included immersive, yearlong, community-based work experiences supported by classroom instruction in the job and social skills was evaluated. The results demonstrated improved job readiness skills and social behaviors among the participating youth. From the job coach perspective, they also observed growth in participants' use of job support, schedule management, and workplace social interactions (Müller & VanGilder, 2014).

Job Satisfaction

For adults with disabilities, the literature describes their job satisfaction, the subjective, positive feelings resulting from work experience, as generally satisfied. Some factors contributing to satisfaction include disability severity, motivation, work demands, physical work environment, job opportunities for social support, and good job fit (Akkerman et al., 2016). The job demands and job resources model may explain the satisfaction levels. Job satisfaction comes from a balance between job stress and job environmental support (Flores et al., 2021).

Specifically, for adults with intellectual disabilities, a systematic review noted high job satisfaction, although it possibly resulted from low job autonomy (Kocman & Weber, 2016). Job autonomy and independence have been shown to support job satisfaction. In a Dutch study of employed (integrated and sheltered) adults with intellectual disabilities, perceptions of

autonomy, belonging, and competence in the job were most related to satisfaction (Akkerman et al., 2018). Using a qualitative approach, a small group of adults with mild/moderate intellectual disabilities in integrated and sheltered employment was used to identify several factors related to job satisfaction. Some themes include the type of job and demands, work friendships, support provided, meaningful work, and independence (Akkerman et al., 2014).

Possibly, a discrepancy in job autonomy may exist because of the complexity of the concept. For example, in a qualitative interview study of salaried employees with mild/moderate intellectual disabilities in a sheltered workshop in Luxembourg, the concept of job satisfaction was assessed. Although most understood the concept, it was recommended that when conducting studies on the concept with people with intellectual disabilities, subject comprehension of the concept should be established prior to study implementation (Kocman & Weber, 2018).

Job satisfaction is a measure of the social validity of supported employment, based on happiness with wages, work friends, integration, and support services provided by a vocational rehabilitation agency. For youth with disabilities, community-based work experiences during the summer support school-time experiences by affording them the opportunity to be immersed in work without academic or extracurricular activity responsibilities. A large group of youth with disabilities participating in a summer vocational rehabilitation program reported working service jobs with modest pay and hours and general job satisfaction with their exploratory learning experiences. However, those with intellectual disabilities in this study were the least likely to hold a job or keep a job during the summer (Carter et al., 2011).

Purpose

Employment options and participation increase for people with disabilities when they are more work-ready, appreciative of their work, and supported (Nevala et al, 2019; Lee et al.,

2022). Best practice recommends that vocational rehabilitation programs should provide a combination of skills training and community-based job experience guided by a job coach to help overcome various employment barriers (Noel et al., 2017). However, there is limited evidence in the literature on youth with intellectual disabilities to help refine this support (Rashid et al., 2017). More research on pre-graduation work experience and work readiness is recommended (Wehman et al., 2018), and more studies on job satisfaction to help improve the work experience of those with intellectual disabilities are also recommended (Akkerman et al., 2018). Therefore, this study's purpose was to examine the work readiness and satisfaction of youth with intellectual disabilities participating in a supported employment program.

Methods

Sample

Thirty-six high school-aged youth with intellectual disabilities (program enrollment criteria: 14-21 years old) and 13 adult job coaches participating in a summer-long supported employment program through a Midwest vocational rehabilitation agency were asked to participate in the study. All possessed intellectual disabilities that posed significant limitations in intellectual functioning and a limitation in at least one adaptive behavior. All youths and their job coaches consented to participate. Youth participants included 12 males and 24 females. All job coaches were between the ages of 21-25, with 2 males and 11 females.

Instruments

To measure any pre- and post-program changes in youth participant work readiness from the youth and their job coaches, the Stages of Change Scale (SOC) was used. The researcher interviewed each youth and their respective job coach using a 9-item, Likert scale (1-Disagree a lot to 5 = Agree a lot). The items ask about feelings about jobs and work. Statements include “I

think about what kind of job I would like”, “I am thinking about training to be able to get a job”, and” I do not know why I need to find a job.” Job coach items were reworded to describe their youth participant mentees. Original Cronbach’s alpha = .834 youth scale; .854 job coach scale. Scores were summed for a total score with three reverse-scored items (Schlegelmilch et al., 2021).

Brief Job Satisfaction Measure II was used to measure the post-program job satisfaction of youth participants. The researcher interviewed each youth upon program completion using the five-item, Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree). The instrument included statements such as “Most days I am enthusiastic about my work” and “I consider my job rather unpleasant.” The original Cronbach’s alpha was .77. Scores are summed to obtain a total score with two reverse-scored items (Judge, 1998).

Procedure

A vocational rehabilitation agency in a Midwest state-sponsored a summer supported employment program for high school-aged youth with intellectual disabilities. Youth participants, their parents/guardians, and staff from the supported employment program collaborated to match youth participants to job settings of interest. Representatives from 13 job settings (cities, parks, schools, retail, and agriculture) volunteered to recruit youth participants. General job tasks included light maintenance, janitorial, clerical/office, animal care, and services.

The program consisted of six weeks of part-time, paid (minimum wage) employment support for youth participants. Working four hours in the morning Monday through Friday, youth participants were trained and supported in conducting their work tasks by the job coach for that site. Job coaches were trained pre-programmed by agency staff with expertise in intellectual disabilities, community engagement, employment, and transition services. Coaches attended a

week-long training that included an orientation to the agency and program, followed by sessions with content and skills practice in job development, job matching, job support, and job site training best practices. Using the skills learned from the training, the job coaches followed a general protocol for all work settings. First, they oriented their mentees to the job site and the employer. Next, they conducted a brief job and task analysis, instructed the mentee on job tasks and soft skills, and gradually decreased their coaching support and increased their natural support over the last few weeks. Finally, they helped with mentee motivation and self-determination throughout the program.

At the end of the first week of the summer-long supported employment program, the researcher met each youth participant and their job coach at the job site. Pre-interviews with both youth and coaches (separately) using the SOC were conducted by the researcher during the lunch break. In addition, during the final week of the summer-long supported employment program, the researcher met each youth participant and their job coach (separately) at the job site. The researcher conducted post-interviews using SOC during the lunch break. In addition, during the final week of the summer program, youth participants were interviewed regarding their satisfaction with their summer jobs using the Brief Job Satisfaction Measure II. In all interviews with youth participants, the researcher tried to rephrase any questions that did not seem fully understood. For example, many youth participants needed clarification on a specific question that asked if they felt enthusiastic about their jobs. Instead, the question was rephrased to ask if clients felt excited about coming to work. The clients were able to understand the questions and answer them.

Data Analysis

Paired *t*-tests were used to compare the SOC Scale, which refers to the mean total scores pre- and post-program for job readiness change as perceived by youth participants. Of the 36 participants, only 22 completed both the pre-and post-scales as matched pairs for the analysis.

Paired *t*-tests were also used to compare SOC Scale mean total scores pre-post program for youth participants' job readiness change as perceived by their job coaches. The mean score was also calculated for post-program youth job satisfaction.

Results

There was no statistically significant difference in the pre- ($M = 34.80$, $SD = 5.77$) and post-program scores ($M = 35.70$, $SD = 5.93$) of youth participants' perceptions of their work readiness ($t(29) = -0.76$, $p = 0.45$).

There was no statistically significant difference in the pre- ($M = 35.44$, $SD = 6.12$) and post-program scores ($M = 34.18$, $SD = 6.59$) of the coaches' perceptions of youth participants' work readiness ($t(33) = 0.85$, $p = 0.40$).

The possible scores ranged from 5 to 35 on the post-program job satisfaction scale, with higher scores reflecting greater job satisfaction. The youth participants reported a mean score of 25.92 ($SD = 3.62$).

Discussion

Vocational rehabilitation programs provide community-based job training and support for youths with intellectual disabilities to prepare them for the future workforce. However, there is limited evidence in the literature on youth with intellectual disabilities to help provide feedback to programs (Rashid et al., 2017). Youth with intellectual disabilities participating in a summer supported employment program were asked to provide their views on work readiness and job satisfaction levels before and after the program. Although they generally seemed to be satisfied

with their jobs and scores for perceptions of their work readiness increased slightly, they reported no significant change in perceived work readiness pre-post program. Their job coaches, who provided support to them throughout the program, also reported a small, although not significant, decrease in work readiness scores for their youth before and after the program.

Work readiness, prepared to meet work expectations, comes from on-the-job training and support. Vocational rehabilitation programs, including summer-paid work experiences, have generally helped improve future employment outcomes for youth with intellectual disabilities (Rooney-Kron & Dymond, 2022) through on-the-job training and coaching (Kregel et al., 2020). Youth participants in this study reported middle-range readiness scores in both pre- and post-programs, as did their job coaches. Interestingly, their job coaches perceived a small, non-significant decrease in readiness scores throughout the program. Perhaps, for some, skill demands, either technical, social, or both, were too high, or youth participants were not as developmentally ready for work as they thought they were, or the job match was not as appropriate as it could have been.

Although training and coaching were provided as a summer exploratory program that only operated for half a day, the duration may not have been adequate to increase work readiness. Programs of longer durations supported by classroom instruction have demonstrated increased work readiness (Müller & VanGilder, 2014). These best practice programs are training-intensive, focus specifically on work readiness, and include some classwork (Wehman et al., 2018), which may not be appropriate for a shorter, more exploratory summer program, such as the one in this study.

Job satisfaction levels are based on many factors, including the provision of appropriate support for job demands (Akkerman et al., 2016; Flores et al., 2021). Having job coaches at the

worksite as a trusted support may have helped balance job stress with job competence, possibly leading to general satisfaction (Akkerman et al., 2018). The summer program provided wages and support services; however, some job settings tended to be more isolated and may have lacked integration with other employees, a key to feelings of belonging and good job fit (Akkerman et al. 2016; Akkerman et al. 2018). Overall, although, like a larger group participating in a comparable paid summer vocational rehabilitation program (Carter et al., 2011), youth participants in this study were also generally satisfied with their experience.

This study was limited by the use of only one supported employment program in one geographic region of a state and the survey methodology. Interviewer bias could have affected the data collection. Although trained and experienced in surveying youth and establishing rapport, this was the first time that the researcher interviewed youth with disabilities. On the other hand, youth participants' social desirability bias may have also affected responses in a face-to-face situation. Some youth participants did not complete either the pre- or post-work readiness scale; however, they completed the post-program job satisfaction survey. Possibly, the concept being studied, work readiness, may have needed to be made clearer to youth participants, as recommended in the literature (Kocman & Weber, 2018).

For summer-supported employment programs for youth with intellectual disabilities, obtaining the views and feedback of youth participants, although sometimes a challenging task, is important to help refine programs, improve experiences, and meet youth needs. Youth participant feedback in this study, for example, suggested that they may need more or longer experiences to feel work-ready. To gain more consistent work experience that can better prepare them to be work-ready, youth can be encouraged to continue participating in summer programs

following their school-based programs. Some may choose to stay in the same setting; however, others may use the summer program to explore different job settings and learn new skills.

Although summer-only programs, such as the one in this study, may be limited in the number of job settings offered due to seasonal and economic concerns, agencies should attempt to provide not only wages and coaching support but also inclusive, integrated settings that can lead to higher job satisfaction (Akkerman et al., 2018). Expanding program length and offering additional integrated job settings may lead to future improvements.

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