

Meaningful Work: Improving Employment Outcomes for Transition-Age Youth With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

ERIK W. CARTER AND LAUREN B. LUNSFORD

ABSTRACT: Meaningful employment can have a significant impact on the lives of young adults with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Unfortunately, too few adolescents with EBD experience successful employment outcomes upon leaving high school. In this article, the authors review components of secondary educational programming that may contribute to improved employment outcomes for adolescents with EBD. Specifically, the authors present 4 skill areas (i.e., social, vocational, academic, and self-determination) and 4 support areas (i.e., community linkages, workplace supports, family involvement, and student involvement) that should receive attention when preparing adolescents for the world of work. Recommended strategies for implementing each component are presented.

KEY WORDS: emotional and behavioral disorders, employment outcomes, self-determination, supports, transition services

Among the many opportunities ushered in by adulthood, meaningful employment frequently is identified as a primary outcome valued by students, parents, teachers, and researchers (e.g., Bassett, Patton, White, Blalock, & Smith, 1997; Soderlun, Epstein, Quinn, Cumblad, & Petersen, 1995). The benefits associated with employment are numerous and include opportunities to learn new skills, develop valued social relationships, contribute to an organization or business, and earn needed income. Moreover, the economic gains associated with employment can directly impact other post-school outcomes, including residential living, quality of life, educational opportunities, community involvement, and self-sufficiency (e.g., Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). As a result, recent legislative and policy initiatives have called on secondary schools to better prepare students for the world of work (e.g., Individuals With Disabilities Education Act Amendments, 1997; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002; School-to-Work Opportunities Act, 1994).

The importance of employment also is apparent for adolescents identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). When provided with adequate skills and supports, transition-age youth with EBD have the potential to make substantial contributions in the workplace. Descriptions of model vocational pro-

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grams for adolescents with EBD clearly indicate that employment is a realistic and attainable goal for many students (e.g., Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Bullis, Moran, Benz, Todis, & Johnson, 2002). Unfortunately, the number of adolescents with EBD who experience positive employment outcomes remains disappointingly low (Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003). After leaving high school, most students with EBD encounter elevated levels of unemployment, underemployment, and job instability (e.g., Wood & Cronin, 1999). Moreover, the jobs that students do obtain typically are characterized by minimal benefits, few hours, low wages, and limited opportunities for advancement. In light of data indicating that substantial numbers of young adults with EBD drop out of school and do not attend college (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), diminished involvement in meaningful employment is especially worrisome.

These outcomes present a significant challenge to practitioners providing secondary transition services to adolescents with EBD. This challenge is compounded further by the results of research indicating that the educational and vocational services received in high school often are the last used by adolescents with EBD (e.g., Bullis & Cheney, 1999). The secondary school years, therefore, represent an opportune time for equipping students with the skills and supports they need to enter the workforce. Unfortunately, many secondary teachers feel unprepared for or have little involvement in addressing this important outcome (Blanchett, 2001; Knott & Asselin, 1999). What can practitioners do to promote meaningful employment outcomes for adolescents with EBD? How can schools increase the likelihood that these students will experience a successful transition to life after high school? The purpose of this article is to review components of secondary transition programming that might contribute to positive employment outcomes for adolescents with EBD. Specifically, we present four skill areas (i.e., social, vocational, academic, and self-determination) and four support areas (i.e., community linkages, workplace supports, family involvement, and student involvement) that should receive attention when preparing adolescents for employment.

Over the past several decades, there has been a shift in how transition services are designed and delivered. There is growing recognition that comprehensive transition programming should not focus exclusively on skill instruction, but also on the development of a broad array of supports to assist transition-age youth in realizing valued outcomes (Hughes & Carter, 2000). Because no student can be expected to acquire all the skills necessary to be fully independent in every school, work, and community setting, a system of individually designed supports should be developed to enable students to participate in desired settings to the maximum extent possible. These two emphases on increasing students' competence and developing supports closely complement each other and provide a practical framework for delivering effective transition services. In the remainder of this article, we will present specific strategies for (a) increasing students' competence and (b) developing transition supports.

Increasing Students' Competence

Adolescents with EBD can benefit from explicit instruction in skills that increase independence, expand opportunities for job advancement, further the development of coworker relationships, and improve others' judgments of their competence. Moreover, when students' competence in employment settings is increased, they are more likely to be valued and accepted by their employers and coworkers. The secondary school years provide a prime opportunity to develop and expand students' skill repertoires. We describe four interrelated skill areas that should receive consideration within secondary transition programming: (a) social skills, (b) vocational skills, (c) academic skills, and (d) self-determination skills.

Social Skills

Appropriate social skills directly impact employment success, coworker acceptance, and job satisfaction. Unfortunately, many adolescents with EBD lack the requisite social interaction skills essential to maintaining competitive employment (Carter & Wehby, 2003). The very social skills deficits that are a defining characteristic of EBD (Kauff-

man, 2001) are the same skills that dominate lists of worker characteristics valued and expected by employers. That is, students may have difficulty negotiating the demands of customers, coworkers, and employers; adapting to fluctuating social expectations; and developing satisfying relationships with coworkers. A poor fit between student skills and employer expectations inevitably leads to problems in the workplace, including job frustration, lack of promotion, or termination.

It is, therefore, recommended that secondary transition programming address social skills training (e.g., Maag & Katsiyannis, 1998). Recent reviews of the social skills literature provide several recommendations regarding the manner in which interventions should be delivered (e.g., Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Mathur, Kavale, Quinn, Forness, & Rutherford, 1998). First, social skills training should be linked directly to students' social skill deficits. Assessments should be conducted to identify the social expectations of a given vocational training setting or job site, the degree to which students' social behavior meets or falls short of those expectations, and possible explanations for any disparities. Second, instruction should target skills that are socially valued within the workplace (Maag & Katsiyannis). Selecting valued behaviors for intervention increases the likelihood that they will be reinforced by employers, coworkers, and customers. Third, social skills training should be both frequent and intense (Gresham et al.). By high school, negative social behaviors may have become firmly entrenched in the repertoires of some youth. Ongoing intervention may be necessary to equip students with appropriate replacement behaviors. Fourth, social skills instruction should address students' acquisition, performance, and/or fluency deficits. Practitioners should not only teach new skills, but also reinforce students for performing and provide frequent opportunities to practice important skills. Fifth, social skills training should be delivered in multiple settings (e.g., regular and special education classrooms, vocational education classrooms, community-based work settings) to enhance skill generalization beyond the training setting. That is, skills acquired exclusively in self-contained

classrooms may not readily transfer to the workplace.

Vocational Skills

Maintaining employment can also present a difficult challenge for some young adults with EBD. The job performance of many adolescents with EBD does not meet the expectations of their employers (Carter & Wehby, 2003). That is, students often do not possess the job performance skills necessary to meet their employers' expectations for work speed, stamina, or quality. Schools can equip students with vocational skills two primary ways.

First, students interested in entering the job market should be encouraged to participate in vocational education courses throughout high school. Although vocational education is a significant predictor of postschool employment (Corbett, Clark, & Blank, 2002), adolescents with EBD enroll in vocational education programs at relatively low rates (Benz & Halpern, 1993). Many students receive limited exposure to vocational curricula, leaving them without the opportunity to learn about, practice, and develop critical work skills. In addition to promoting skill development, participation in vocational education classes may reduce dropout rates by providing students with a more motivating curriculum and a meaningful context within which to learn academic skills (Harvey, 2001).

Second, students with EBD can benefit from receiving on-the-job training with support *prior* to leaving high school. Despite the impact paid-work experiences can have on postschool employment (e.g., Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000), too few students with EBD participate in supported job experiences during high school. Such experiences afford students the opportunity to learn firsthand about workplace norms, job responsibilities, and employer expectations—information that is difficult to convey in a classroom context. Students can gain valuable work experience through a variety of paid and unpaid school- or community-based job training programs (e.g., job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, supervised work experiences). Through these experiences, students should be provided with explicit opportunities to make connections between what is learned in school

and its application in the workplace (Wentling & Waight, 2001). Moreover, students should be provided opportunities to sample a range of work experiences, allowing them to explore and develop their career interests and discover their strengths and abilities.

Academic Skills

Social and vocational skill training should not comprise the exclusive focus of secondary educational programming. As most opportunities in adulthood are directly or indirectly linked to success in school, academic achievement can have a far-reaching impact on the adult lives of adolescents with EBD (Lane, Gresham, & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). Improved reading, writing, math, and various other academic skills often are critical in enabling students to move beyond entry-level employment and can positively affect future employment status. Unfortunately, a significant percentage of adolescents with EBD exhibit concomitant academic deficits, placing them far below grade level in basic academic skills (e.g., Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004). Moreover, obtaining a diploma can have a significant impact on students' lifelong earnings. The current emphasis on high stakes testing, however, often translates into more stringent exit requirements and academic standards, further highlighting the importance of acquiring sufficient academic skills to obtain a diploma.

Unfortunately, many youth with EBD continue to regard school as unimportant and fail to recognize the long-term value of possessing academic skills. Integrating academic and vocational instruction may comprise an effective approach for improving students' academic performance (Wentling & Waight, 2001). An integrated curriculum specifically teaches students how skills learned in the classroom directly apply to activities in the workplace. By helping students understand the connections between school and work, students may come to perceive the curricula as more functional, motivating, and personally relevant. Moreover, secondary programming that merges academic and vocational instruction may increase students' access to the general education curricula (Eisenman, 2000).

Self-Determination Skills

When students leave high school and enter the workplace, they lose access to much of the support that was available to them in school. Most workplaces require an increased level of independence beyond what many students with EBD have been prepared for. In order to increase their self-direction on the job and reduce dependence on others (e.g., employers, job coaches, teachers) to prompt appropriate behavior, students must learn strategies for managing their own social and work behavior (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). The acquisition and performance of self-determination skills (e.g., self-management, choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting, and self-advocacy) are associated with improved employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Unfortunately, many teachers report that they are unsure of how to teach self-determination skills, and few students with disabilities report using these skills to enhance their job performance (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000).

There are several ways that self-determination skills can enable students to successfully make the transition into the workforce. First, acquisition of self-determination skills may allow students to participate more fully and meaningfully in the career planning process (Snyder & Shapiro, 1997). Students should be taught skills such as setting realistic employment goals, evaluating progress toward self-selected goals, advocating for opportunities and supports, and accepting responsibility for one's actions (Test et al., 2004). Second, adolescents may not be aware of the standards that constitute acceptable performance on the job. As a result, students may benefit from explicit instruction on self-management strategies for identifying and maintaining acceptable work performance. Such strategies will enable students to monitor and evaluate their own job performance. Third, many students do not self-identify as having a disability at a job site—a revelation that might connect them with the accommodations and supports that they need to be successful, but that also might stigmatize them on the job. Teaching students to manage their own behavior on the job site can equip them with the skills they need to achieve greater

independence and success on the job, which would reduce their need for outside assistance. Fourth, students should be taught to advocate effectively for themselves in an assertive, but nonaggressive manner. Self-advocacy skills are essential for effectively and efficiently managing small challenges (e.g., dealing with the bank when one is overcharged for additional checks) to large challenges (e.g., negotiating with an employer who reduces one's weekly hours).

Developing Supports

An exclusive focus on skill instruction alone is far too narrow to meet the multifaceted needs of many adolescents with EBD. Effective transition services must combine skill instruction with the development of social and environmental supports as part of comprehensive transition planning. Supports refer to the constellation of resources, relationships, strategies, information, and assistance provided to a student for the purpose of facilitating a successful transition to life after high school (Hughes & Carter, 2000). These supports can take a wide variety of forms (e.g., job placement assistance, transportation, job modifications) and derive from numerous sources (e.g., adult agencies, coworkers, employers, family members, mentors, school staff). By incorporating these supports early on, planning teams can ensure that students' transitions consist of uninterrupted movements from school to adult life. Although many sources of support exist, we present the following four areas of support that should receive consideration during secondary transition planning: (a) community linkages, (b) workplace supports, (c) family involvement, and (d) student involvement.

Community Linkages

The educational, vocational, and social needs of many adolescents with EBD are characterized by their comprehensive, intense, and ongoing nature. A lone teacher, school, or agency cannot be expected to single-handedly meet the complex needs of every student they serve. Although a variety of supports may be available in their communities, few students use adult services after high school, confirming the notion that links

with community agencies do not happen without intentional efforts. Many students with EBD do not have the skills to access this support on their own or the knowledge that such resources even exist. As a result, the transitions of students with EBD are typically punctuated with significant gaps in services and supports.

At the school and community level, schools should be deliberate in their efforts to build ongoing relationships with public and private community-based agencies and organizations such as vocational rehabilitation, mental health centers, state departments of education and labor, juvenile justice systems, and the social security administration. We also must ensure that these links exist at the level of individual students by making certain that students and their families are aware of and connected with supports and resources long before school services cease (Malloy, Cheney, & Cormier, 1998). For example, the following employment-related supports are among the many that may be directly available to students through the aforementioned organizations and agencies: vocational assessments, career counseling, job development, job coaching, postsecondary vocational training, transportation, or job equipment (i.e., uniforms, tools, occupational licenses). Linking students and their families to community support systems ensures that there is continuity in services and supports. In addition, transition planning teams should consider how students might be connected with more informal community supports, such as mentors, peer job clubs, and resources within students' faith communities.

Workplace Supports

A supportive job match can play a critical role in the overall employment success of an adolescent with EBD (Banks, Charleston, Grossi, & Mank, 2001). Practitioners should give careful thought to assisting students in identifying job sites that are rich in both social and environmental supports. Although most job sites provide multiple sources of support to their employees with and without disabilities, individual places of business vary in the types and amount of supports available. Practitioners responsible for vocational training or employment placements

should carefully assess the degree to which social and environmental supports are available. Owing to high turnover rates among these young adults, it is not enough to connect the student with just any available job. Moreover, jobs should be identified in which external support can easily be provided, because many students will require at least intermittent job support from outside school or adult agencies. Finding jobs that will accommodate these supports may take some time. However, a good job match with numerous natural supports is critical given some students' reluctance to self-disclose their disability label at their job site.

Family Involvement

Family members can play an important role in supporting students in achieving positive employment outcomes. Parents, siblings, and relatives typically share a longstanding history with the student and have a vested interest in his or her future. Moreover, family members often are the primary support system for students with EBD, providing guidance, information, support, and advocacy for students throughout high school and after they leave it. As a result, researchers have increased attention to the importance of both identifying the resources available to adolescents with disabilities and understanding the social and cultural contexts within which these individuals and their families operate (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001). In addition to identifying and understanding the particular transition outcomes valued by students and their families, it is also critical that practitioners understand the particular supports and services that these individuals value most. For example, some families may place greater value on the support of informal community-based networks over the more formal supports provided by school and adult agencies.

Family members may be able to provide a constellation of valued supports as students make the transition from school to work. These support roles can include identifying students' strengths, interests, and experiences; contributing to the vocational assessment process; collaborating in problem solving; using personal networks to support a student's job search; and providing information about the student's nat-

ural support systems of relatives, friends, neighbors, and faith community members. Moreover, family members may play an ongoing role in identifying or providing transportation; assisting with money and time management; advocating for services and supports; providing opportunities to practice self-determination skills; and delivering encouragement, motivation, and moral support (e.g., Hutchins & Renzaglia, 1998). Therefore, it is important that practitioners partner with families throughout the transition planning process. Although it is unrealistic to expect every family member to be involved actively in transition planning, practitioners can take several simple steps to encourage their involvement. These steps include providing clear information about the purposes and processes of transition services, creating an open atmosphere of communication, communicating frequently about school services and activities, delivering training to parents, allowing flexibility in meeting times and locations, and providing recognition for the valuable role parents play (e.g., Osher & Osher, 2002; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

Student Involvement

The importance of actively involving students with EBD in the transition and individualized education program planning process is clearly articulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (1997). Active involvement in the transition planning process ensures that students' interests, preferences, and values are represented, allowing them to identify employment goals that are personally meaningful. Moreover, involvement in transition planning may enable students to make clearer connections between their own educational experiences and their desired employment goals and outcomes. It also provides them with an opportunity to practice newly acquired self-determination skills. Unfortunately, students with EBD typically are given little opportunity to be involved actively in setting their own educational and vocational goals (e.g., Snyder, 2002).

Transition teams can engage in several activities that support students' involvement in transition planning. Teachers must support and encourage early involvement,

beginning by age 14 or even younger. The need for an early start takes on added importance for adolescents with EBD. Students with EBD drop out of school at alarmingly high rates, which severely diminishes the amount of transition services they can actually receive (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Planning team members also must support students' participation skills before and during meetings (Snyder, 2002). Many students lack preparation and must be taught the skills they need to actively participate in their IEP meetings. A variety of programs have been developed for teaching students

these skills (e.g., Martin, Huber Marshall, Maxson, & Jerman, 1996; McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001). Furthermore, practitioners should carefully consider which settings and social structures support student involvement in transition planning (Snyder).

Implications for Practitioners: Assessing Skill and Support Needs

We have presented several components of transition planning that may contribute to positive employment outcomes for young adults with EBD (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Recommendations for Increasing Students' Skills and Developing Supports

Area	Recommendations
<i>Increasing competence</i>	
Social skills	Direct social skills training to students' social skill deficits. Focus instruction on socially valued workplace skills. Provide training that is both frequent and intense and delivered in multiple settings. Address students' acquisition, performance, and/or fluency deficits.
Vocational skills	Encourage participation in vocational courses throughout high school. Provide students with supported, on-the-job training opportunities.
Academic skills	Integrate academic and vocational instruction. Assist students in making connections between classroom learning and workplace applications.
Self-Determination skills	Teach skills that enable student to participate fully in the planning process. Instruct students on skills for managing their own behavior. Teach self-advocacy skills.
<i>Developing supports</i>	
Community linkages	Ensure that students and their families are connected with supports and resources before graduation. Link students and their families with formal and informal sources of support.
Workplace supports	Identify jobs and training sites that are rich in social and environmental support. Provide appropriate levels of external support.
Family involvement	Actively involve family members in transition planning. Support families with information, clear communication, and respect.
Student involvement	Support involvement in transition planning early in high school. Provide students with frequent opportunities to make choices.

Although these recommendations are not intended to be exhaustive, they can provide guidance to practitioners who seek to improve the employment outcomes of the students they serve. As with all educational services for students with disabilities, it is critical that skills and supports be individually tailored to meet various students' specific needs, strengths, and interests. The degree to which a given student's transition plan will contain more or less of a given component should be determined on an individual basis, in close collaboration with the student, family, and other members of the transition planning team. The assessment process plays a critical role in the development of a comprehensive transition plan by enabling planning teams to identify the skills and supports a student will need to pursue and maintain a meaningful career (Sitlington & Clark, 2001). Although a full discussion of assessment procedures is beyond the scope of this article, some general recommendations for practitioners are warranted. First, the assessment process should involve a range of people (e.g., vocational, general, and special education teachers; employers; family members; coworkers). These stakeholders may each have different perspectives on the skills required to be successful in a given employment setting and the availability of support. Second, assessment of skill and support needs should be ongoing. As students accrue job experience, their employment goals, desires, and skill and support needs may change. Third, the practitioners should use multiple approaches to assessment, including interviews, observations, situational assessments, interest inventories, and job history profiles. A variety of informal and formal assessment instruments are available to assist transition planning teams in the assessment process. We have included in the appendix a list of resources for assessing students' skill and support needs.

Conclusion

A cursory look at the employment outcomes described in the transition literature might lead practitioners to incorrectly conclude that employment is an unrealistic goal for most adolescents with EBD. Because these students often exhibit

challenging behavior in the classroom, vocational and special education staff may have low expectations for their employment prospects, which may limit students' opportunities of participating in vocational education courses, on-the-job training programs, and postsecondary vocational training. Yet, when provided with adequate skills, supports, and opportunities, young adults with EBD are capable of making significant contributions in the workplace. The strategies described in this article can guide practitioners in the development of effective and comprehensive transition programs for adolescents with EBD.

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APPENDIX
**Resources Addressing the Assessment of
Transition Skills and Supports**

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