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Self-Determined Employment Preference for Youth in Transition from School to Work in Rural Areas

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Abstract

Self-determination, or the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself, is both a legal right and a responsibility of an individual. Self-determined employment is consistent with contemporary practice, outcome-based research, and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. In this article, we describe three challenges facing youth with disabilities in rural areas related to determining their own employment, including (a) extensive or chronic poverty in some rural areas as a factor limiting selection of preferred employment, (b) intensive competition for limited jobs available, and (c) the potential for dropping out of high school or other educational programs. In response to these challenges, we describe guidelines that may assist youth, families, educators, and service professionals as they address employment issues.

Contemporary literature on school-to-work transition recognizes youth with disabilities as central participants in decision-making processes (Agran & Wehmeyer, 2000). Unlike traditional transition services in which professional experts identify transition goals and services (Wehmeyer, 1996), the self-determination philosophy gives youth responsibilities to make choices, take risks, control outcomes, and assume responsibility for personal action (Agran & Wehmeyer). Self-determination is defined as "the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164). Self-determined employment preference involves identifying preferred jobs, setting transition goals related to a preferred career track, training in specific skills, and placing the youth in preferred employment upon completion of high school. Youth with various disabilities can assist in determining their preference for employment (Morgan & Ellerd, 2005), including those with specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance, autism spectrum disorders, and multiple disabilities. However, career awareness programs, preference assessment, and vocational training must be geared to the reading levels and other skills of each youth.

Self-determined employment preference is important for youth with disabilities for three reasons. First, as noted by Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998), self-determination is related to contemporary best practices in special education including the principle of normalization (Wolfensberger, 1972), the empowerment philosophy (Rappaport, 1987), quality of life (Schalock, 1996), and community integration (Bruininks, Chen, Lakin, & McGrew, 1992). For youth with disabilities to become valued and contributing community citizens, they must be taught to advocate for their needs and actively support the needs of others. Second, determining employment preference is

supported by federal legislation on transition of youth with disabilities from school to work (i.e., Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act: IDEA, 2004). According to the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, transition services refer to a coordinated set of activities for a youth with a disability age 16 or above "based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences and interests . . ." (Section 602, 34 (b)). Moreover, the 2004 IDEA reauthorization now requires local education agencies (LEAs) to provide a summary of the youth's academic achievement and functional performance including recommendations on how to assist in meeting the youth's post-secondary goals (Section 614, (c)(B)(iii)). Therefore, LEAs are accountable for demonstrating their efforts to assist the youth in self-determined post-school goals, including those related to employment. Third, researchers report identification of preferred employment is associated with improved work outcomes (Mithaug & Hanawalt, 1978) and reduced problem behavior (Bambara, Ager, & Koger, 1994).

For some youth with disabilities, self-determined employment may be coupled with post-secondary education. For others, the transition to employment may occur during the high school years through work study activities or after-school work. In the transition to self-determined employment, the role of the high school teacher or transition specialist is to assist the youth in identifying preferred jobs, teach job-related and self-advocacy skills, communicate with other professionals (e.g., rehabilitation counselors), and promote youth as valued employees.

The Challenge: Identification of Preferred Employment in Rural Areas

Youth with disabilities in rural areas face at least three challenges achieving self-determined employment. First, identifying preferred employment may not be a high

priority in rural areas experiencing extensive or chronic poverty. Historically, high poverty levels have been associated with low employment opportunities (McGranahan, 2003). According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2002), while the rural rate of poverty slowed to a 25-year low of 13.6% in 2001, it appears to be increasing again (about 15% in 2002) and consistently remains higher than metropolitan poverty (11.5% in 2001, 12% in 2002). Employment in traditionally rural industries, such as agriculture, has declined (McGranahan, 2003). Rural alternatives to agricultural employment have not arisen, although significant growth may emerge in some areas based on the ethanol industry (Ethanol Research, 2006). Limited employment opportunities for rural youth with disabilities may mean that any job takes precedence over the preferred job.

Second, while out-migration of rural youth is high, competition for jobs among those who remain is often intense (Lichter, Roscigno, & Condon, 2003). Youth with disabilities are often at a disadvantage because they are often unsuccessful in competing for limited jobs (Lichter et al., 2003). The effect of competition may mean that a youth must focus efforts on obtaining any available job exclusive of preference.

Third, if schools are not implementing active support programs for youth with disabilities, including coursework with clear connections to career paths and vocational opportunities, youth may drop out (Kortering & Braziel, 2002). Although the National Longitudinal Transition Survey-2 reported the drop-out rate across all categories of disabilities decreased from 47% in 1987 to 30% in 2003 and rates were lowest in rural areas compared to urban or suburban areas (Cameto, 2006), rural youth who drop out may have fewest choices relative to employment. The scarcity of jobs and intense competition in rural areas present a disadvantageous formula for a youth who drops out. Even those youth who drop out and gain employment may find that they remain in stationary jobs without opportunity for promotion or advancement (Cameto, 2006). This problem was not diminished by the 2004 re-authorization of IDEA which changed in definition of "transition services" in IDEA (2004) by increasing the starting age from 14 to 16. Shaw (2006) noted transition advocates predict this change will be associated with increased rates of dropouts.

Although self-determined employment preference may represent contemporary practice, many youth with disabilities in rural areas have several strikes against them. Upon completion of high school, some families may arrange to place their youth in an urban-based residential program or in the care of urban-based family members. With urban relocation, youth may be better suited to seek employment or participate in a supported employment (i.e., a job-coach assisted) program. For

those choosing to remain in the rural community, the only options may be part-time work, volunteer assistance, application for all available jobs, "hanging out", aimlessness, or despair. A set of guidelines for youth interested in establishing career paths in rural communities is needed.

Guidelines for Assisting Rural Youth in Transition

Communities and economics in rural areas are as diverse as the landscape they occupy. Solutions need to be matched to characteristics of specific settings. However, a list of guidelines may shed light on the process of assisting rural youth in transition and certain elements from the list may match the needs of particular communities or areas. In addition to youth, guidelines may be relevant to families, educators, transition specialists, and vocational rehabilitation counselors (i.e., support team members). As with most planning activities, the earlier the process is started, the more likely it will be successful. Rather than wait until age 16 as the mandated starting point for transition services (IDEA, 2004), youth and support team members should establish a timeline with educational and development activities beginning at an earlier age, preferably 13-14 years of age.

Keep individual preference and self-determination central to the transition process. Economic plight or intense competition for jobs should not deter youth and the support team from recognizing the importance of employment preference assessment in rural areas. Assessments of individual preferences will provide educators and the youth with information necessary to initiate job placement procedures. Several assessment procedures are available (e.g., Becker, 2000; Holland, 1997; Martin et al., 2005; Morgan, Ellerd, Gerity, & Tullis, 2001). For example, Holland's (1997) Self-Directed Search requires answers to questions on career preferences leading to a code indicating high scores in Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, or Conventional occupations. Specific occupations are listed corresponding with each youth's code. The programs by Martin et al. (2005) and Morgan et al. (2001) use video of actual jobs providing realistic illustration of job tasks. The Morgan et al. (2001) program shows video of 120 jobs including several available in rural areas. A youth first makes selections of work conditions (e.g., indoor or outdoor work, working with the public or working with co-workers), job tasks (e.g., heavy equipment, office machines, child care), then watches video of jobs corresponding with initial selections. The outcome is a short list of 5-10 jobs matching preferences. The youth and support team can examine the list, determine local openings, and begin job development activities. The program is available on CD-ROM or on an internet site (www.yesjobsearch.com).

Assess unique community characteristics and needs. Griffin and Sherron (1992) describe community job market screening as the process of determining the current hiring trends in a local business community and identifying appropriate opportunities to match with youth preferences. The goal is gathering information on types of jobs rather than finding specific openings and making a placement. This information can be re-used to assist additional youth seeking employment. The youth and an advocate (e.g., teacher, parent) (a) visit with the members of the chamber of commerce, civic organizations, or church groups; (b) read the business sections of local newspapers for information on new and existing businesses; (c) tour businesses to assess needs and build relationships with employers; and (d) visit with employers to discover what types of positions exist, what the job requirements are, and which positions have high turnover. A well-defined marketing strategy should be developed before contacting employers to avoid wasting time and creating negative impressions. The youth and support team should identify reasons for inquiring about jobs (e.g., to respond to the employer's needs by providing a reliable employee who can perform the job well), communicate enthusiastically and honestly about the prospective employee, get to the point quickly and stay focused, answer all questions, and leave a brochure or business card. Information on types of jobs should be compiled and updated to assist other job seekers.

Youth with disabilities can play an active role in these processes. Youth can develop resumes and business cards, create video clips of their performance on jobs, organize names and contact information on job leads, make phone contacts, and schedule interviews. Information on job seeking skills, vocational skills, and employment-related social skills is available from numerous sources (e.g., Wehmeyer et al., 1998; Brolin, 1997; JistWorks, 2006; Ryan, 2004). Griffin (2001) provides useful information on job development in rural areas.

Rally family and community resources. The youth and support team should identify support systems in families, neighborhoods, churches, social groups, and civic organizations to advocate for a youth's employment preferences and actively participate in the job search. With assistance, the youth may develop a resume and distribute it through family members and community groups while requesting information on potential employment.

Generate job development strategies tailored to rural ecology and individual preferences. Job development involves identifying appropriate employment opportunities in the community for an individual (Griffin & Sherron, 1992). The youth or support team may want to arrange self-employment or supported employment. Self-employment may be a viable alternative for some youth (Wehmeyer et al., 1998).

Griffin (2001) describes supported employment case studies in rural areas, including individual placement with on-site supports, contract work performed by the supported employee (on or off the work site), performance of work at home, and other methods. Using the Internet, youth in rural areas may be able to take advantage of markets previously unavailable. For example, several youth may manage a website taking reservations for nearby recreation sites or process orders for products developed by nearby rural industries for shipping to distant consumers.

Prepare for job modification. Once job placement is secured and performance is assessed, the teacher or employer should be prepared to modify the job. Job modification, or job carving (Griffin, 2001) refers to reducing or reorganizing steps necessary to complete a job to accommodate an individual's current skill level or work schedule. Job modification allows a youth with disabilities to continue working even if particular tasks cannot be performed. For example, a youth may make photocopies but be unable to perform other office tasks, such as placing sales receipts in order according to date of sale. The latter task may be "carved out" to another employee while the youth takes on additional tasks. A related concept, reasonable accommodation, is required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. A reasonable accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job enabling a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions. See <http://www.jan.vwu.edu> for more information.

Develop active support systems. High school and other educational programs need to develop active supports leading to career paths for youth with disabilities in rural areas. Supports that are clearly linked to career paths should help reduce school drop outs. Support systems will vary depending on needs and available resources, but may include collaborations with applied technical centers (Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001), establishment of work-study experiences (Cameto, 2006), or development of School-to-Work Opportunities (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997). The School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) of 1994 authorized state funding for programs to improve work-related skills of youth preparing to leave school for work. STWOA offered funding to assist with career selection, combining school-based learning with work-based learning, and providing instruction in work attitudes, employability skills, and work participation skills (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997).

Summary

Self-determined employment is consistent with contemporary practice, outcome research, and current legislative mandate. However, in some rural situations, any job may take precedence over a preferred one. This

article describes guidelines to assist youth and their support team members in achieving self-determined employment. Each guideline assumes the youth and support team start from a position emphasizing the importance of self-determination, particularly as it relates

to employment preference. To the extent that youth take charge of challenging situations and contribute to the process of finding and maintaining their own employment, they may become more effective decision makers and problem solvers.

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