

Chapter 4

Transition to Gainful Employment of High School Students with ASD

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ABSTRACT

The following action research study is focused on the effectiveness of the transition to work programs for students with a diagnosis of autism. The research was conducted in a middle-sized school district in Southern California. The study identified graduates from high school who were part of the transition work programs before receiving their certificate of completion or high school diploma. The objective of the study was to establish if the students were employed and to determine the effectiveness of the transition to work program. This qualitative study used surveys and interviews of the graduate students, the students' parents or legal guardians, and the students' previous employers. The researcher obtained information about the effectiveness of the transition work program in relation to the specific training provided by the program in the areas of social skills, knowledge of expectations, sequencing steps of a task and carryout steps until completion, and the ability to ask question when needed.

INTRODUCTION

This research explored experiences of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as they leave a transition program and enter the working world, and, in particular, the skills that can make them of particular benefit to society when they are channeled and applied to very specific tasks. The implementation of transition programs greatly enhances the student's abilities to be successful in the working world. The transition to work programs, such as the WorkAbility program, helps students with special needs to learn and practice the skills necessary to be successful in the work environment. This study investigated how individuals with autism contributed to society in a positive way with varying levels of support based on their unique needs and abilities.

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This investigation explored the experiences of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder after they have graduated from transition work programs and join the working world in the community. The research question is: how effective is the transition work program for graduates with a diagnosis of autism and to what degree is the program effective in their transition into the labor force?

This research reviewed the transition work programs of students with a diagnosis of autism who graduated from high school with a certificate of completion or high school diploma, their participation in a transition work program, and how this has affected their current work placement once they were prepared to enter the work force. Students who had been out of the program for a minimum of one to two years were included in this research. Subsequent evaluation of information concerning the individual's current role(s) in the community were added to help evaluate the outcome of their experiences.

In order to answer the research question, the following questions were included: Are individuals with autism employed? If so, what types of jobs do they have and how long have they been employed? Then, have they been employed and lost their job? If so, what reasons lead to the lost of job? Also, are the individuals with autism working in the area that they headed for in their transition work programs? And finally, do individuals with autism feel that their transition program prepared them well for their present employment?

For this research on working individuals with diagnosis of autism, information was gathered from employers and parents in order to triangulate the data. This helped to give insights into the effectiveness of the work program from the parents and the employer's point of view. For parents, the questions were aimed at determining how successful they believed the program had been in helping their child learn about the working world. For employers, questions were centered on how well the transition program had prepared individuals with autism who graduated from the transition program.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The National Organization on Disability found that "Despite research documenting the benefit of community-based employment, the vast majority of people with ASD continued to be unemployed" (National Organization on Disability, 2004; Wagner et al., 2005). A study of 187 young adults with Autism (mean age 2.5) revealed that only one fourth was employed (Kobayashi & Murata, 1992; Mawhood, Howlin, & Rutter, 2000). The results of a related study found that among 19 men with Autism, only 1 was competitively employed and 3 worked in sheltered or voluntary jobs" (Hendricks & Wehman 2009).

Autism and the Importance of Transition Programs

With the increasing number of individuals diagnosed with autism more efforts are being made to offer additional supports to this population in order to foster independence. According to the United States Government Accountability Office (2005), there are approximately 120,000 children diagnosed with autism being served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2002. This number has increased more than 500 percent over the past ten years. In the state of California, approximately 36,328 students were diagnosed with autism and were being served under IDEA in the year 2007 (Data Accountability Center, 2007). Independence for an individual with autism is essential to a successful life and for inclusion in the community. Success for such an individual is to be gainfully employed.

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