

employment or economic success: the experience of individuals with disabilities in transition from school to work

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This research explores the mediating effects of severity of disability on the employment outcomes of participants with disabilities, taking into account their perception of interest–job match. Participants were 115 high school students with disabilities who took part in an intensive school-to-work transition program that explored occupational interests in relation-to-work opportunities. Results of a 1-way analysis of covariance indicated that severity of disability had a significant effect on the employment outcomes of participants despite interest–job matching. Although participants experienced positive employment outcomes in terms of job entry, these outcomes may not necessarily translate into higher earnings.

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The rehabilitation process values independence, integration, and inclusion of people with and without disabilities in employment settings and least restrictive environments (Maki & Riggat, 2004). Counseling professionals who serve persons with disabilities in vocational settings often measure career outcomes through the assessment of employment outcomes that occur in the competitive labor market (Bolton, Bellini, & Brookings, 2000). The underlying assumption is that successful community employment leads to increased empowerment and is associated with positive independent living outcomes for persons with disabilities (Bolton et al., 2000). However, there is still a need to better understand those factors that lead to placement and economic success, especially in transition stages for persons with disabilities.

Of increasing interest to many counseling professionals are the potential effects of the variables interest–job match and severity of disability on the employment

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outcomes of persons with disabilities (e.g., Fabian, Lent, & Willis, 1998; Jagger & Neukrug, 1992; Siegel & Gaylord-Ross, 2001). Prior research suggests that interest–job match contributes to successful employment outcomes of persons with disabilities. However, available research indicates that severity of disability may have a mediating effect on the income of students with disabilities. The purpose of this article is to explore the intervening effects of severity of disability on the employment outcomes of students with disabilities, taking into account their perception of interest–job match. For the purpose of this study, we operationally defined *employment outcomes* as the monthly earned wages of each participant. Results of research that focuses on the benefits of matching between occupation and interests for young adults, at various levels of functional severity of impairment, may offer new insight into best practices for promoting the transition from high school to the world of work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition Outcomes and Interest–Job Match

Scholars have examined specific transition activities with the goal of identifying interventions that lead to career success. For example, Fabian et al. (1998) reported that transition activities in which students with disabilities could explore and match their interests (e.g., job tryouts, job shadows, internships) led to successful job entry. Furthermore, Beale and Holinsworth (2002) indicated that individuals whose jobs did not match their interests demonstrated low job production, job dissatisfaction, and personal distress. The match between career interests and employment opportunities has been described by many career theories as a significant factor in career planning stages (Holland, 1997; Super, 1994). This interest–job match, or *congruence*, has been studied in relation to career maturity (Ohler & Levinson, 1996), aspects of well-being (Meir, Melamed, & Dinur, 1995), and person–environment match (Thompson, Flynn, & Griffith, 1994) and has been used to explore employee and job retention in community employment programs (Beale & Holinsworth, 2002).

Results of these previous studies suggest that interest–job match is positively related to measures of well-being, such as self-esteem, work satisfaction, and lower levels of anxiety and burnout (Meir et al., 1995). One of the few studies examining interest–job match among persons with disabilities was conducted by Jagger and Neukrug (1992). These researchers explored the match between occupation and interests in relation to job satisfaction of 72 persons with disabilities who successfully attained employment through vocational rehabilitation. The authors reported a significant positive relationship between interest–job congruence and job satisfaction.

Counselors and transition specialists have long advocated that matching employment opportunities and the career interests of students with disabilities is an effective intervention to improve the employment outcomes of young adults (Fabian et al., 1998; Jagger & Neukrug, 1992). Sharf (2002) noted that Super's (1994) Life Span Development model of career progress suggests that persons

whose interests match their career opportunities should enjoy career success, which has been supported by available research (Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot, & Golden, 2003; Jagger & Neukrug, 1992; Siegel & Gaylord-Ross, 2001; Thompson et al., 1994). West, Targett, Steininger, and Anglin (2001) noted that the match between interest and occupation is especially important in the transition from school to work and in the future job placement of students with disabilities. West et al. suggested that rehabilitation and transition professionals actively explore community resources to increase the opportunity for job match and, thereby, the employment opportunities of students with disabilities.

Transition Outcomes and Severity of Disability

Outcome studies of transition programs for youth with disabilities have often focused on the characteristics of students with disabilities, with the goal of identifying those characteristics that may predict employment success. Much of this research has focused on the severity or the functional limitations of disability as a significant predictor of employment (Fourqurean, Meisgeier, Swank, & Williams, 1991; Frank & Sitlington, 2000; Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1997). Frequently, studies exploring employment outcomes of students with disabilities have used employment status (e.g., employed, unemployed) or employment tenure (e.g., time employed or hours worked) as a measure of the effectiveness of the career intervention strategy. For example, Frank, Sitlington, Cooper, and Cool (1990) examined adult adjustment of former special education students from Iowa and found an employment rate of 66%. Employment for the majority occurred in sheltered employment, settings that provided a range of segregated vocational programs that offered transitional employment experiences and extended employment programs to persons with disabilities. These results were similar to those reported by Fourqurean et al. (1991) among students with disabilities from Houston and by Siegel and Gaylord-Ross (2001) among students with disabilities from San Francisco. Frank, Sitlington, and Carson (1991) reported that of the 130 students with behavior disorders from Frank et al.'s (1990) study in Iowa, only 33% obtained full-time employment 1 year after graduation. In contrast, the unemployment rate of peers without disabilities 1 year after high school graduation was 4% (Frank & Sitlington, 2000).

Few studies have used earnings as a dependent measure in relation to occupational success among youth with disabilities. Mank et al. (1997) examined the relationship between employment features and outcomes for employees with disabilities who participated in supported employment, settings that facilitated competitive work in integrated work settings through assistance such as job coaches, transportation, assistive technology, specialized job training, and individually tailored supervision. Severity of disability was correlated to the monthly wages of the employees with disabilities. Bolton et al. (2000) suggested that earnings are as important and sensitive a measure of career outcomes as employment status. These researchers also indicated that the use of employment status alone can provide a misleading picture of success, because many persons

with disabilities are employed in low-paying jobs. Thus, the question remains: employment or economic success?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 115 high school students with physical, cognitive, and behavioral disabilities in a midwestern state. Participants were selected based on their desire to obtain a job after they completed high school, as noted in their individual education plan (IEP). Consequently, these students were provided transition services that allowed them to explore careers based on their interests. Of the participants, 29% ($n = 33$) were female and 71% ($n = 82$) were male. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 21 years ($M = 19.70$, $SD = 1.04$); race and ethnicity were reported as 78.3% ($n = 90$) Caucasian/White, 10.4% ($n = 12$) African American, 5.3% ($n = 6$) Asian American, 5.3% ($n = 6$) American Indian, and 0.7% ($n = 1$) Hispanic. Participants received services based on the following disability characteristics: learning disability (58.4%, $n = 67$), mental retardation (13.3%, $n = 15$), autism (8.3%, $n = 10$), behavioral disorders (5%, $n = 6$), and mental disorders (3.5%, $n = 4$); other disability characteristics, such as traumatic brain injury, cardiac conditions, and seizure disorders, were reported for 2 or fewer participants (8%, $n = 9$). Disability information was not divulged for 3.5% ($n = 4$) of the participants.

Regarding severity of disability, the special education levels designated by the U.S. Department of Education were used. These levels describe the amount of support each student may need in comparison with their peers without disabilities. Of the 115 participants, 57% ($n = 66$) were classified as having less severe disabilities (i.e., Level I, requiring less individualized attention or structure in their academic work), 36% ($n = 41$) were classified as having moderate disabilities (i.e., Level II, requiring more individualized attention, accommodations, and structure in their academic endeavors), and 7% ($n = 8$) were classified as having severe disabilities (i.e., Level III, requiring considerable individualized attention and structure in their academic work; Iowa Legislative Services Agency, Fiscal Services, 2007). Because of the small number of participants in the Level III category, these participants were grouped with those in the Level II category, thus representing the individuals with more severe disabilities. Similar classifications regarding severity of disability have been used in previous investigations (e.g., Fabian et al., 1998; Frank & Sitlington, 2000). Severity of disability was treated as the independent variable for the present study.

Participants received services from the local area education agency between the years of 2001 and 2006. The agency provided services to the participant population (i.e., students who had an IEP and desired competitive employment post-high school) through the Super Senior Project. The Super Senior Project prepares students with disabilities for satisfying careers based on their interests, capabilities, and needs (National Dissemination Center for Children With Disabilities, n.d.). The Super Senior program has two components: (a) a *high school element*, in which a personalized career plan is developed, including opportunities to job shadow and gain short-term work

experiences in order to help students develop a firm career goal by the end of their senior year, and (b) a *5th-year element*, in which students have on-the-job training assistance, leading to paid employment before exiting the school system.

Data Collection

Information regarding participant characteristics (e.g., gender, severity of disability), interests, career plans, and employment outcomes was collected and masked through the education agency, a regional educational agency that partners with schools to provide specialized academic services for students, families, teachers, and administrators. Such information was provided to us in a manner that did not provide the name or other identifying information of any participant. Data were collected in a standardized manner by trained transition specialists (fourth and fifth authors) who worked in the Super Senior Project.

Interest–job match. Job match information was collected to assess the participants' perception of the degree to which their choices of a career have been implemented in the world of work. Implementation of career choice was measured through a survey of high school students conducted by the Super Senior staff as part of the students' participation in the Super Senior transition project. The survey was self-reported based on a 5-point scale in which 5 represented the participant's perception of a good match between vocational interests and job placement and 1 represented the participant's perception of a poor match between vocational interests and job placement. This information was treated as the covariate of this study.

Employment outcomes. The employment outcomes of participants were measured through a survey of high school seniors and graduates conducted on an annual basis by the education agency. Data were obtained regarding each participant's type of employment and employment outcome (monthly gross wages). This information was classified as the dependent variable for this study.

Data Analyses

In this study, the effects of interest–job match and severity of disability on the monthly wages for young adults with disabilities in transition from school to work were explored. Descriptive statistics were used to provide a general portrait of the participants of this study. A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was also conducted to evaluate the effects of severity of disability on the employment outcomes of youth with disabilities, holding the youth's job match score constant (Hays, 1994).

RESULTS

Interest–Job Match

We obtained the interest–job match scores from the self-reported survey assessing participants' perception of interest–job placement match. The majority of the students in this study (50.4%, $n = 58$) indicated that their vocational interests strongly matched

their final job placement, 37.4% ($n = 43$) indicated that their interests moderately matched their final job placement, and 12.2% ($n = 14$) reported that their interests did not match their final job placement. Overall, the range of interest–job match score was between 3 and 5 ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.70$).

Employment Outcomes

Table 1 presents a summary of the employment and economic outcomes for the participants of this study. As a result of participation in the Super Senior Project, study participants were able to enter a variety of occupations, such as food service and preparation (21.70%, $n = 25$), clerical (11.30%, $n = 13$), sales (9.56%, $n = 11$), child day care (9.56%, $n = 11$), and janitorial (9.56%, $n = 11$). For the purposes of the present study, we operationally defined employment outcomes as the monthly gross wages of the participants. The wages of all the participants, those who were working full time and those who were working part time, were included in the calculation of monthly wages. Results indicated that participants’ monthly wages ranged from \$133.00 to \$3,052.00 ($M = \$1,120.18$, $SD = \$563.45$).

Relationship of Disability and Wages

A one-way ANCOVA was conducted, and a preliminary analysis evaluating the homogeneity-of-slopes assumption tested the interaction between the covariate and the factor in the prediction of the dependent variable. This test indicated that the difference between monthly wages (dependent variable) and job match score (covariate) did not differ significantly as a function of severity of disability (independent variable), $F(1, 111) = 0.42$, $p = .52$. Considering this result, we proceeded with the computa-

TABLE 1
Employment Outcomes of Participants

Job Placement	<i>n</i>	%
Food service and preparation	25	21.70
Clerical	13	11.30
Sales	11	9.56
Child day care	11	9.56
Janitorial	11	9.56
Computer repair	8	6.90
Telemarketing	8	6.90
Construction	6	5.46
Machine operation	6	5.46
Medical services	4	3.40
Auto/car services	4	3.40
Factory worker	4	3.40
Security guard	2	1.70
Dog groomer	2	1.70

tion of the ANCOVA. Results of this analysis suggested that severity of disability has a significant effect on the monthly wages of the participants, holding constant their interest–job match score, $F(1, 112) = 4.80, p < .05$. The strength of association between severity of disability and the monthly wages of the participants was small (Cohen, 1988), as noted by η^2 , with severity of disability accounting for 8% of the total variance of monthly wages. Although the majority of the participants reported a match between interests and occupations, the mean income of those participants with less severe disabilities ($M = \$1,227.42$) was greater in comparison with the mean income of those participants with more severe disabilities ($M = \$975.73$).

DISCUSSION

Participants in this study had the desire to obtain competitive employment as stated by their IEP and transition plan. Two outcome measures were considered. On the one hand, all 115 participants were able to obtain a job and thus experienced employment as an outcome, which is an outstanding success. In addition, more than 50% of the participants indicated that their job matched their employment interests. On the other hand, results of the present study indicated that severity of disability should be regarded as a factor that mediates economic outcomes, as measured by monthly wages, taking into account the interest–job fit among the participants. A potential explanation for this phenomenon may be the development of employment expectations by the participants involved in the transition program. Many of these participants entered the Super Senior transition program because they were interested in obtaining competitive employment after they completed high school. However, it was noted that 21.70% ($n = 25$) of these students preferred the food service and preparation area, a career area known for entry-level pay (Fourqurean et al., 1991; Frank et al., 1990; Siegel & Gaylord-Ross, 2001). The choice of an occupation with limited income potential may lead to low monthly wages among persons with disabilities.

Persons who crystallize career interests, identify capacities, and implement these choices early often obtain the career of their choice (Sharf, 2002; Super, 1994), especially with the assistance of transitional education services. However, the process of interest and ability exploration leading to potential employment choices often does not occur simultaneously with the provision of transition services to students. Early exploration of careers may be a key to connecting interests and experiences that lead to employment and economic success in secondary education or transition programs. For the students with disabilities who participated in this study, it appears that their experiences may have been limited, because they developed employment expectations by the time they exited secondary education and began their transition program. Consequently, many of these participants may have entered the transition program with expectations of occupations often characterized by lower wages and requirements regarding knowledge or skills development. Exploring employment expectations earlier in the transition process may allow students with disabilities to identify occupational areas that, in later stages of development, will provide them with both desirable employment and greater economic outcomes.

Limitations

Although the participants in this study were similar to participants in previous studies (e.g., Frank & Sitlington, 1993; Frank et al., 1991; Mank et al., 1997; Siegel & Gaylord-Ross, 2001), the findings should be interpreted carefully. First, given the small number of participants in the present study, generalizability to other populations of students with disabilities in school-to-work transition programs cannot be made. Although, the levels of support (severity of disability) used in the present study are endorsed by many state and national organizations and agencies (e.g., American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities), there is limited information indicating the consistency of these support levels across school settings. However, the robustness of the present study, despite the small sample size, confirms widely held beliefs among many professionals that interest–job matching may not always lead to economic success despite the positive picture presented by employment–placement rates. Future research should contemplate including a bigger sample size or a comparison group of students without disabilities in order to provide a more accurate picture of the employment outcomes of students with disabilities. In addition, researchers should explore other outcome measures that could be used to confirm, disconfirm, or shed new insights into the transition process of youth with disabilities.

Implications for Practice

The development of career maturity within students with disabilities before entering transition programs could allow for the development of occupational knowledge, requirements, and expectations that, in later stages of development, could translate into more remunerable employment placements. Many of the participants in this study entered competitive employment with preferences for occupations that are characterized by lower wages and occupations traditionally filled by persons with disabilities. In order to expand the occupational expectations of students with disabilities, counseling, transition, or rehabilitation professionals should conduct more labor market research that expands traditional employment for persons with disabilities based on job openings and salary levels (Gilbride et al., 2003).

Students with disabilities should benefit from job tryouts or internship-type experiences that provide them with career experiences and choices. In these types of activities, the individual learns firsthand what it is like to perform certain job tasks before formally committing time or resources on that job. Also, as noted by Halpen (1994), students with disabilities in transition from school to work should participate in community-based interventions that target the identification of their career preferences. Certainly, such experiences will allow these students to develop job expectations that could lead them to economic success. Students with disabilities should also be provided with timely career education to make the choices of entering a particular occupation or obtaining a postsecondary education degree. This process of career education should not only provide students with the traditional likes and

dislikes of a job but also look more into personal characteristics and maturity as key factors influencing career choice (Holland, 1997).

Hitchings, Luzzo, Retish, Horvath, and Ristow (1998) stated that education, counseling, and transition specialists, along with the parents of students with disabilities, should be proactive in promoting a wide variety of careers for these students in transitioning stages. This transition process is one that may present many challenges for students with and without disabilities. Therefore, in order for students to be successful during this transition, they need to be provided with the necessary support in the areas of vocational training, community, and independent living. In addition, the identification of community resources, the provisions of traineeships and hands-on job experiences, access to postsecondary education, development of standardized transition programs, and the generation of theoretically sound research are some of the tools that will further enhance promotion of better employment opportunities and community integration, goals to which all persons with disabilities aspire as they transition from school to the world of work.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should explore other outcomes measures, such as job satisfaction, in addition to wages and employment status of young adults with disabilities. As stated by Bolton et al. (2000), employment status may provide a misleading picture of the actual occupational situation for persons with disabilities. The exploration of other potential variables (e.g., job tenure) may provide new ways of analyzing transition outcomes. In addition, research efforts should consider the impact of severity of disability and perceived career opportunities, as well as the role of economic self-sufficiency, in the choice of an occupation. Past research has focused on the career outcomes of persons with specific disability types. Future research needs to address functional aspects of disability and the impact of functional factors on career choice rather than on diagnostic labels or severity of disability. Finally, and perhaps most interesting, research that compares the employment outcomes of students who engage in a transition program, such as the one described in this study, with the employment outcomes of those who have not received transition services may be beneficial. Findings from such investigations would put the earnings of students in perspective relative to their prospects had they not had such a program.

SUMMARY

This study examined the relationship between severity of disability and employment outcomes of students with disabilities considering the participants' perception of interest–job match. Participants with more severe disabilities received lower wages than did peers with less severe impairment, despite achieving employment in an occupation that matched their interests. In addition, the findings suggested that participants of this study entered transition programs with interests in occupations characterized by lower wages. Although these findings were similar to those reported in

previous research studies, additional research is needed to further advance the career development of young students with disabilities in stages of transition. Students with disabilities may benefit from different career and interests exploration opportunities, even if they have little or no occupational experience (Hitchings et al., 1998). Like the participants of this study, students with disabilities who participate in transition programs emphasizing interest–job matching can experience positive employment outcomes, although that may not necessarily translate to higher economic outcomes. Rehabilitation and education professionals, as well as the parents of students with disabilities, should be proactive in promoting a wide variety of career exploration interventions for these students in transitioning stages.

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