

## **The Bridge Project: A Transition Framework for Young Adults**

**When young people with learning disabilities complete their formal education, how prepared are they to cope with the challenges of employment? There seems to be an urgent need to revise the curriculum for pupils with disabilities in their final years of schooling.**

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**CHRISTINE LINEHAN and GAIL BIRKBECK are researchers at the National Research Agency, Dublin.**

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### **BACKGROUND**

The need for a transition curriculum to assist young adults with intellectual disability bridge the transition from school to adult life has received considerable attention in the United States. A transition curriculum for school leavers with disabilities has yet to emerge in the Republic of Ireland. In an attempt to address this need, the Bridge Project, an EMPLOYMENT Initiative funded project, piloted and evaluated a two year transition framework comprising (i) a transition curriculum, (ii) a work experience programme, and (iii) individual transition planning. This article reviews the implementation of this framework in six pilot schools (N=50 participating students) over a two year period (1996-1998). The findings indicate that while the transition framework was received favourably, the timeframe of two years was deemed inadequate for such an extensive educational programme. Examination of the findings and recommendations are discussed.

### **NEED FOR TRANSITION SERVICES FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES**

The need to improve service provision for young adults with intellectual disability making the transition from school to adult life has received considerable attention in the United States. This need has been fuelled by numerous studies revealing that many young adults with disabilities, on completion of their education, fail to maintain positions of employment, are unable to live alone, do not perceive themselves to be integrated into their communities and express general dissatisfaction with their quality of life (Edgar, Levine & Maddox, 1986; Hasazi, Gordon & Roe, 1985; Kregel, Wehman & Seyfarth, 1985; Wagner, 1989).

## **DEFINING TRANSITION**

The emergence of a transition movement in the United States can be traced to initiatives promoted by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) who defined transition as: "an outcome-oriented process encompassing a broad array of services and experiences that lead to employment" (Will, 1984, p.1). Halpern (1985) advocates a broader focus for the concept of transition including not only the aspiration of successful employment, but in addition, two other aspirations: a quality residential environment and adequate social and interpersonal networks. This broader focus was adopted by the 1990 amendments to the United States Education for All Handicapped Children Act which mandates that Individualised Education Program (IEP) meetings for school leaving students must address the planning of necessary transition services. More recent developments in the transition movement are reflected in the definition of this concept presented by the Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) of the Council for Exceptional Children (Halpern, 1994) which states:

"Transition refers to a change in status from behaving primarily as a student to assuming emergent adult roles in the community. These roles include employment, participation in post-secondary education, maintaining a home, becoming appropriately involved in the community, and experiencing satisfactory personal and social relationships."

## **TRANSITION: TOWARDS COMMUNITY BASED LEARNING**

Halpern (1994) acknowledges that as the definition of transition becomes broader in its focus, the classroom becomes a less appropriate environment in which to teach many of the skills required by young adults with disabilities. Halpern argues that opportunities must be provided for these individuals to firstly, engage in a variety of work experience placements and secondly, attain living skills such as shopping, banking, and using public transport within a community setting.

The preceding review illustrates the changing focus of transition since the OSERS publication in the mid 1980s. From a perspective focusing almost exclusively on employment opportunities, transition services now aim to assist young adults with disabilities not only to secure employment but also to participate in further education, to live independently, to establish and maintain satisfying personal relationships and to perceive themselves as fully integrated members of their community. Such a change in focus requires practical changes in the delivery of transitional curricula from traditional classroom environments to community based learning.

## **EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES IN IRELAND**

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (Ireland, 1993) identifies thirty-one special schools in the Republic of Ireland which provide educational facilities for 3,298 students with mild levels of intellectual disability. A further thirty-three special schools are identified as providing similar facilities for 2,046 students with moderate levels of intellectual disability. These schools receive recognition at national (primary) school level only. This status gives rise for concern as the Report of the Special Education Review Committee estimates that over half of the students attending these facilities are of post primary age. This concern is acknowledged by the Special Education Review Committee in its review of current special education provision in special schools which states:

“... pupils may spend their whole lives, potentially from four to eighteen years of age, attending the same school, without the opportunity of transferring to a separate senior school at the appropriate age. Senior pupils of more than seventeen years, whose age-peers in ordinary schools are transferring to third level education and training, continue to attend Special Schools in the company of children of little more than four years of age”(p.68).

While no explicit structure exists in the Republic of Ireland to assist these students in their transition from school life to adult life, informal pilot programmes have proved most successful for staff and students alike (Birkbeck & Donohoe, 1994).

### **THE BRIDGE PROJECT**

The Bridge Project, an EMPLOYMENT Initiative EU funded project, supported by Youthstart, aimed to ‘bridge’ the gap between school and adult living for a sample of 50 young adults (15-18 years) with intellectual disability who were attending their final two years of school education. The project was promoted by a consortium of four service agencies which provide services for persons with intellectual disability in the Republic of Ireland: (i) KARE (main promoter); (ii) St. Michael's House; (iii) St. John of God; and (iv) the Brothers of Charity.

The Bridge Project aimed to pilot and evaluate a Transition Framework in six pilot special schools attached to the four service agencies identified above. The selection of participating schools was at the discretion of each agency. Twenty-five students from these schools enrolled in the project in 1996 and participated in the project over two academic years (1996-1997 and 1997-1998). A further twenty-five students enrolled in the project's second year, 1997, and participated

in the project over one academic year (1997-1998). Participant selection was at the discretion of each school. Demographic information collated on participants revealed the majority were male (N=30; 60%) with N=20 (40%) female.

While the participation of teachers responsible for final year classes was paramount to the successful implementation of the Transition Framework, an additional resource was also made available to each of the pilot schools through Bridge Project funding. This resource was the establishment of a Facilitator position in each school. The remit of Facilitators was broad and included delivering in-school curriculum material, providing support to participants engaged in work experience and acting as a liaison person between the school and participants' families.

## **THE TRANSITION FRAMEWORK**

The Transition Framework comprised three interrelated elements:

(i) A Transition Curriculum; (ii) Work Experience Placements; and (iii) Individual Transition Plans. A brief review of these elements is presented below. A more detailed account of these elements is documented in the project's evaluation reports (Linehan & Birkbeck, 1997; Linehan & Birkbeck, 1998).

### **A TRANSITION CURRICULUM**

A text based curriculum was devised and forwarded to the six special schools over the duration of the project. The curriculum provided instruction on six domains of adult living: (i) Home & Family; (ii) Employment & Education; (iii) Community Skills; (iv) Personal Development & Relationships; (v) Leisure & Recreational Skills; and (vi) Emotional & Physical Health. The curriculum provided information on the content of material to be covered in each domain and practical suggestions regarding delivery of this material. During their first year enrolled in the project, students were instructed on material from all six domains with two domains being delivered during each of the three terms comprising the academic year. A selection of these domains were revisited during the students' second year.

### **WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS**

Work experience placements spanning an average of three weeks duration were provided for participants. Those students who enrolled in the project over two academic years completed a total of five work experience placements. The

students who joined the project in its second year completed two such placements. Placements were secured by Facilitators through a variety of methods including cold call, use of adult service employment agencies and personal recommendation. Work Experience Placements were evaluated using a variety of standardised and tailor made measures (Walsh & Linehan, 1997; Hagner, 1992; Haring, 1991).

### **INDIVIDUAL TRANSITION PLANS (ITPs)**

The concept of Individual Transition Plans, while advanced in the United States (Halpern, 1994), has yet to be implemented in the Irish school system for persons with intellectual disability. The Bridge Project encouraged students, teachers, school principals, facilitators and parents to meet with a view to identifying attainable goals for students throughout the duration of the project. The meetings provided an opportunity for all parties to contribute to identifying available resources, to setting target dates for the attainment of goals, and to identifying suitable persons to take responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of programmes.

### **RESULTS FROM THE EVALUATION OF THE BRIDGE PROJECT**

As part of the external evaluation of the project, the Transition Curriculum, Work Experience Placements and ITPs were all extensively monitored throughout the duration of the project. A selection of the findings from this evaluation is presented below. The complete evaluation is documented in the Final Report (Linehan & Birkbeck, 1998).

#### **TRANSITION CURRICULUM**

Feedback from both facilitators and teachers regarding the Transition Curriculum revealed that the provision of a text based transition framework placed a welcome structure on material which had previously been delivered in an informal manner. The material comprising all six domains was, in general, perceived most favourably by both facilitators and teachers alike. The time frame for delivery, two academic years, was however considered insufficient. Facilitators and Teachers proposed that certain domains, for example, Personal Development & Relationships, be introduced at the earliest possible stage and be revisited on an ongoing basis. In addition, they suggested that certain material, for example, the World of Work, required adaptation for students with moderate levels of intellectual disability.

## **WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS**

A survey conducted with facilitators examining a sample of seventy-five work experience placements revealed a wide variety of work sites including Restaurants, Garden Centres, Garages and Hairdressers. The overwhelming majority of these placements (86%) were perceived by facilitators to have been completed successfully. Reasons provided for the success of these placements included:

“... got on well with customers,” “enjoyed office duties,” “dramatic transition from stubborn rudeness to enthusiasm due to fantastic staff,” “loved working with plants and animals.”

Facilitators were also asked to provide explanations for those placements (14%) which were not perceived successfully. Their comments included: “Hated getting dirty on the farm,” “no interaction with anyone,” “spent three weeks acting the clown but no one told me until I called for a second placement.”

It is important to consider that participants can benefit from the experience of unfavourable work placements (e.g. unstimulating work, few work colleagues) as such experiences can assist in clarifying their likes and dislikes in real settings.

## **CONSUMER SATISFACTION SURVEY**

In an attempt to elicit the views of participants to their work placements, the Consumer Satisfaction Survey (Parent, 1993) was administered by interview to each participant by the facilitator following each work experience placement. The measure comprises a total of 38 open ended and multiple choice items which address six aspects of employment: (i) Job Details; (ii) Supervision; (iii) Relationships and Teamwork; (iv) Job Conditions; (v) Job Satisfaction; and (vi) Support Person Satisfaction. The responses provided by participants, as outlined below, indicate a high level of vocational satisfaction.

When asked, for example, if they felt they could ask their boss for help on experiencing a problem, the overwhelming majority of participants who responded to the item (N=16; 94%) stated that they could approach their boss. When asked to describe their co-workers, the majority of respondents (N=13; 76%) endorsed the option ‘nice’ with a further 24% (N=4) endorsing the option ‘alright’. No participant endorsed the option ‘mean’. Finally, in an attempt to assess general satisfaction with work, participants were asked “Did you enjoy the

type of work that you did?" The majority of participants (N=10; 59%) endorsed the option 'I like my job duties a lot' with a smaller percentage (N=5; 29%) endorsing the option 'My job duties were ok.' Only two participants (12%) reported that they 'didn't like the job duties much.' These responses indicate that, from a subjective perspective, participants enjoyed the social aspects of work, interacting with employers and co-workers, more so than the job tasks they were engaged to undertake. This finding is supported by participants' responses from open-ended interviews where they reported enjoying work because they "liked helping people," were given an opportunity to "meet people," "liked the other boys and girls there." Other reasons cited by participants included "It was grown up," "get out from school" and "getting paid."

### **INDIVIDUAL TRANSITION PLANS**

Individual Transition Planning attempted to individualise the Bridge Project Transition Framework to take cognisance of (i) each student's strengths and weaknesses, (ii) goals articulated by students, parents, and teachers, and (iii) feedback gathered on each student over the duration of the project. Consequently the project viewed individual transition planning as more of a process rather than a product. This process was well underway in all of the schools through ongoing discussions with students and interested parties as the project was winding down. Unfortunately, implementation of individual transition planning was hampered by the workload involved at school level in delivering the transition curriculum along with running a work experience programme. While much work remains to be completed on achieving meaningful individual planning, feedback from the six pilot schools suggests that the project has laid down the foundations for Individual Transition Planning to operate.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The Bridge Project Transition Curriculum, piloted and evaluated over a two year period, has been well received by students, parents, facilitators, and teachers. It provides a useful structure to guide those responsible for assisting young adults with disabilities bridge the transition from school to adult life. While the framework requires modification in a number of areas such as the timeframe and its suitability for those with moderate levels of intellectual disability, it is a starting point from which the recognised need for curriculum development for students with disabilities can be addressed. Taking cognisance of the feedback provided from all parties regarding the Bridge Project Transition Framework, a suggested scenario was proposed that students would commence the Transition Framework

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