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## **Making the Transition to Integrated Employment: An Evaluation Study of a Community Based Work Experience Programme**

Students and young adults with intellectual disabilities face formidable challenges as prospective employees in the current bleak economic climate in Ireland. The evaluation of a Dublin based work experience transition programme, however, indicates positive outcomes in terms of job-finding practices and realistic attitudes on the part of the participants.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Vocational training and employment services are the way forward for people with an intellectual disability if they are to achieve full social integration (ILSMH, 1990, Walsh, 1991). Employment imparts not only the obvious advantage of earned income, but also other benefits such as companionship, purposefulness and esteem which are valued widely in our society. These benefits arguably should be available to all young adults entering the labour market, including those who have learning disabilities. Increasingly, educators and other service providers aim to develop programmes which can ease the transition of students with special needs to integrated employment opportunities (Winup, 1992).

### **TRANSITION PROGRAMMES - BRIDGES TO EMPLOYMENT**

A formal agency transition process can facilitate the delivery of appropriate



services in the domains of employment, domestic life, the community and recreation/leisure. Essential components for successful transition include: (1) an educational programme that provides for functional curricula in natural and integrated settings, (2) an individualized transition planning process and (3) placement into a meaningful employment outcome (Wehman et al, 1985). Such transition programmes can be described as "bridges" to employment (Will, 1984) or "to establish and implement a plan for either employment or additional vocational training of a handicapped adult" (Wehman et al, 1985). In its simplest form this process provides a mechanism to develop new adult services for persons with intellectual disability.

### **DUBLIN BASED PROJECT**

This paper reports on the development of a programme established in 1991 in Dublin which aimed to offer students a host of individualised vocational training and work experiences which were flexible and fulfilling as well as market-based. Situated in a small centre located in the community, the programme offered academic courses to the students - for example, Maths, Geography and English. Other activities included daily living skills, arts, crafts and catering. A key element in the curriculum was the introduction of students to the world of work by placing them in real, competitive jobs and trying to expand their vocational knowledge through work orientation classes.

This programme was evaluated from October 1991 to April 1992 in order to determine whether this new model of transitional education promoted further integration of the students by enhancing their job-finding skills. In this paper we ask whether the students' vocational knowledge improved as a result of their programme of work experience.

### **METHOD AND SAMPLE OF STUDY**

Initially, there were 23 students in total, most of whom had attended a special school until age eighteen at least and all of whom had received two years of Level One vocational training and were currently in their third year. All except two (aged 30 and 44 years) were aged between 20 and 23 years. However during the course of the programme, one student left the centre. The characteristics of the remaining participants (N=22) are presented in Table 1. Nearly all (92%) of the participants lived at home, and the remainder were living in a group home or hostel.



**TABLE 1:  
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

Age	Mean 22 Range 20-44
Level of Handicap	Mild 55% Moderate 41% Severe 4%
Sex	Males 12 Females 10
Use of Public Transport	Yes 77% No 5% Training 18%

Information about the social competence and/or presence of additional handicaps of the participants was drawn from a client database established within the service agency in Dublin (Rafferty, 1991) and regularly updated (Walsh and Birkbeck, 1992). These ratings, for example - "Language use" or "Presence of epilepsy" - were made by staff members who knew the participants. These particular scores indicate that the participants were relatively independent in completing activities of daily living.

**TABLE 2: MEAN SCORES ON SOCIAL COMPETENCE DOMAINS  
(LOWER SCORES = MORE INDEPENDENCE)**

SOCIAL COMPETENCE DOMAIN (RANGE OF SCORES)	STUDENTS N=22 MEAN SCORES	SOCIAL COMPETENCE DOMAIN (RANGE OF SCORES)	STUDENTS N=22 MEAN SCORES
Eating (1-5)	1.14	Vision (1-3)	1.00
Mobility (1-5)	1.05	Hearing (1-3)	1.00
Toileting (1-4)	1.05	Epilepsy (1-4)	1.36
Comprehension (1-5)	1.41	Physical Care (1-5)	1.27
Language Use (1-6)	1.64	Need for Supervision (1-3)	1.14



## MATERIALS

For the students attending the course a questionnaire was designed to test their knowledge of various everyday jobs and to see if this knowledge improved over time. Sets of colour photographs of people at work, for example a bus driver or a Garda, were used in conjunction with the questionnaire (St. Michael's House Research, 1990). The questionnaire looked at the students' experiences at work and at the centre as well as testing their vocational knowledge, for example, how they would go about looking for a job.

## PROCEDURES

Information was gathered from the students at two points: (1) In October 1991, the initial total group of 23 was interviewed for the Job Survey study. (2) In June 1992, 20 students took part in the second follow-up of the Job Survey study conducted in October.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF EVERYDAY JOBS

First of all the students had to identify the job. Students improved in their ability to identify all of these ten jobs between October 1991 and June 1992 (Table 3), by which time all students had had some opportunity for at least one work experience.

<b>TYPE OF JOB</b>	<b>OCTOBER N=23</b>	<b>JUNE N=20</b>
<b>Supermarket</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>90%</b>
<b>Restaurant</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>95%</b>
<b>Car/Garage</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>Cleaning</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>95%</b>
<b>Production</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>90%</b>
<b>Office</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Garden</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Shop</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Delivery</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Construction</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>100%</b>



The students were also asked could they do the jobs in the photographs. Their perceptions varied over time (Table 4), with some increases in the percentages who felt they could do jobs in the “cleaning”, “production”, “restaurant”, “garage” and “office” areas - all available in work experience placements. It was notable that the percentage of students who felt they could do a job in “construction” decreased over time, and that this was an area in which none of the students had had work experience. It could be said that the students were being more realistic about their abilities in June as these jobs are sometimes not always the most practical for them.

**TABLE 4: PERCEIVED ABILITY TO DO A JOB**

<b>TYPE OF JOB</b>	<b>OCTOBER N=23</b>	<b>JUNE N=20</b>
<b>Supermarket</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>75%</b>
<b>Restaurant</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>75%</b>
<b>Car/Garage</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Cleaning</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Production</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Office</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>75%</b>
<b>Garden</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Shop</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>Delivery</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>Construction</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>35%</b>

Finally the students were asked about specific job-related tasks involved in each of the ten jobs. The mean number of tasks named for each job was calculated (Table 5), ranging from 1-5 tasks. Information about each job increased between October 1991 and June 1992. By June the students were able to identify more tasks for each job, suggesting their knowledge about these jobs had increased as well as their ability to communicate this information. This held for all jobs, whether or not the students had work experience in that area during the year.

It can be seen from Table 5 that the students' grasp of the tasks involved in a set of typical jobs improved during the course. They identified between 1.1 and 1.9 tasks for each of the jobs named in October. By June, they were more knowledgeable: the mean number of job-related tasks had increased, and they identified between 1.7 and 2.7 tasks for the same jobs.



<b>TABLE 5: THE MEAN NUMBER OF TASKS IDENTIFIED FOR SPECIFIC JOBS</b>		
<b>TYPE OF JOB</b>	<b>OCTOBER N=23</b>	<b>JUNE N=20</b>
Supermarket	1.6	2.1
Restaurant	1.7	2.4
Car/Garage	1.8	2.2
Cleaning	1.2	1.7
Production	1.3	1.8
Office	1.9	2.7
Garden	1.7	2.4
Shop	1.3	2
Delivery	1.1	1.9
Construction	1.7	1.9

### **LOOKING FOR A JOB: VOCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE**

#### **“I’m able to work”.**

The students were asked at both times if they thought it would be difficult or easy to get a job - at both times, the majority believed this would be difficult.

#### **“...no more jobs any more in Dublin”.**

In June 1992, the students who thought finding a job would be easy suggested that training would help them as well as “looking at a notice board”. One student said “I am able to work”.

Most students referred to the unemployment situation in Ireland as their reason for the difficulties in job finding: “people are leaving Ireland because they can’t get jobs”. One student expressed concern that he would not be able to find a job that he would like, while another thought it would be hard to learn how to get a job. This pattern remained consistent over time.

Nine students at the second interview again referred to the unemployment situation in Ireland, saying “over 400,000 - are looking for a job”, “it’s hard to look for a job, there’s too much unemployment”; and “it’s hard these days, no jobs really around”. Finally, the students were asked how they would go about



finding a job. The answers are presented in Table 6.

<b>HOW TO FIND A JOB</b>	<b>OCTOBER N=23</b>	<b>JUNE N=20</b>
<b>Media</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Ask/Look Around</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>Train/Interview</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>FAS/MANPOWER</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>C.V/Boss/Phone</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>20%</b>

It is notable that the number of students who had no idea how to go about finding a job had decreased by the end of the year. Furthermore, a number of new job-related words had appeared in the interviews by June. For example, students were aware of the additional training courses available to them. Others referred to the "interview" procedure when job-seeking and how to prepare a "C.V."

#### **LOOKING FOR A JOB: IMPROVED CONFIDENCE**

According to the students, their confidence in their own ability to work alone improved during the year. By June, the percentage of students who felt they needed further help to do a job had decreased from 70% to 55%. This finding suggests that the training the students received throughout the year gave them enough confidence to work with less assistance.

The students' work experience seemed to have some influence on stated preferences in that one third of the students (33%) preferred the same job at both times and this choice was also the area in which they had been placed for work experience.

The students who preferred a job to a workshop situation did so because they thought a job was better: "I think a job is better to have". Other reasons included: "I'm capable of working" and "I want to get away from the workshop", "I'm starting on computers now".

Finally, a review of the current status (December 1992) of the students at the training centre indicated that eight students had gone on to further training



specifically aimed at open employment, and seven had already obtained full - or part-time employment. The remainder were in other employment services. Thus the majority (75%) achieved an outcome which reflects the employment focus of the programme.

## SUMMARY

Due to the small size of the sample in the survey, it is difficult to make general claims about the findings. However, they do suggest that a direct experience of work is an effective element of programmes promoting the transition of young adults with intellectual disability from school or centre-based vocational training to open employment. The students clearly gained awareness of job-finding practices and developed realistic views of the current employment situation in the country. Their grasp of the challenges they faced as prospective employees in no way seemed to detract from their new-found confidence in themselves or their employability. It will be the task of parents, service providers, educators and employers to ensure that their confidence is well-founded.

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