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A Proposed Integrative Model for Enhanced Career Development for Young Adults With Disabilities

Dawn C. Lorenz

Models of career development have been discussed as a matter of growth over the life span and in relation to social learning. An integrated approach using specified career development theories to assist young adults with disabilities will allow professionals to better understand the school-to-work transition and implement meaningful interventions.

Young adults transitioning from high school to postsecondary activities are at a pivotal time in their lives in which career decision making is a paramount concern. Research has identified several influencing factors that contribute to the school-to-work transition, including the institutional environment, organizational staffing strategies, the group context, and individual differences (Ng & Feldman, 2007). Mediating factors may also heavily influence work role identification. A student with a disability, for example, may have greater difficulty in making a successful transition to postsecondary activities because “durability and stability of identification with different roles can significantly influence the success of STWT [school-to-work transition]” (Ng & Feldman, 2007, p. 124). Additionally, role changes during adolescence in social roles, occupational roles, and recreation roles may also be difficult for students with disabilities as they struggle to find settings and roles that fit their needs and strengths (King, Baldwin, Currie, & Evans, 2005). King et al. (2005) indicated that “underlying these role changes are challenges . . . formulating life goals, setting up living arrangements, dealing with barriers to the physical accessibility of workplace buildings and classrooms, modifying educational curricula, and learning new life skills and personal care routines” (p. 198). Because of these challenges, youth with disabilities are one third less likely to be employed after high school and continue to be at risk for social and educational difficulties following graduation (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). External factors that may influence career decision making for young adults with dis-

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abilities include individual and family adaptation to disability, environmental factors and/or imposed or presumed societal barriers to independent living, and social learning and expectations brought about by the influence of culture and community. Secondary components to a disability that influence career development, such as functional limitations and psychological needs, may impede physical or cognitive capabilities as well as increase the potential for low self-esteem and poor self-image (Shahnasarian, 2001).

Current theories of career counseling seek to address career development needs of the individual throughout the life span through social learning as well as experiential self-development. Models of career development when used in isolation, however, fail to fully address career development as it occurs for young adults with disabilities because models may not effectively address the work role identification or address other potential mediating factors. A multimodel approach that uses a life span career development concept, social learning theory, and emphasis on work personality and satisfaction may be best suited to young adults with disabilities. This eclectic type of approach to career counseling with young adults with disabilities may be used to explain and assess appropriate career development processes and identify needed intervention techniques that promote autonomy, effective occupational decision making, and self-advocating behaviors. In this article, I seek to identify a more comprehensive theoretical approach and potential career counseling interventions for young adults with disabilities.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Many theorists have hypothesized as to how career decisions are made. Although some theorists postulate that any one of these theories could suffice when working with individuals with disabilities, particularly with respect to transition from high school to postsecondary activities, one theory alone may not be sufficient to understand and address the individual's needs from all perspectives. For example, to best understand young adults with disabilities as they transition into the world of work or postsecondary education, one must understand their developmental process as it pertains to their own career journey. It becomes equally important to understand the unique social and cultural implications that disability may have on individuals as they move toward autonomous career choices. Additionally, understanding the work personality (i.e., occupational preferences and satisfaction with choice) is essential in completing the career development perspective for young adults with disabilities. Although most career theories address a type of person–environment interaction, the differences between and among these theories preclude the exclusive use of one without attention to the others (Osipow, 1990). For these reasons, it is essential to understand career development of young adults with disabilities from a multifaceted approach that encompasses development across the life span (Super, 1980),

social learning (Mitchell, Jones, & Krumboltz, 1979), and work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984).

Developmental Process

In Super's (1980) life span career development theory, the individual passes from growth into exploration through the use of fantasy, interest development, and capacity realization. According to Super, career development takes place across the life span, beginning in childhood with growth and subsequently in adolescence with exploration. Activities commonly associated with the early stages of Super's life span theory include beginning to develop a sense of self and a foundation for understanding the world of work (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005).

Predictors of effective career development for people with disabilities are traditionally addressed from the exploration stage, a necessary precursor to career decision-making skills and later career adjustment (Ochs & Roessler, 2001). Youth with a disability that occurs early in life may receive limited opportunities for career exploration and development of decision-making capabilities throughout the growth and exploration stages suggested by Super's life span development theory (Curnow as cited in Beveridge, Heller Craddock, Liesener, Stapleton, & Hershenson, 2002). Additionally, increased medical dependence and decreased autonomy, societal misconceptions and stereotypes, and environmental constraints on mobility or independence for people with disabilities may also affect the exploration stage.

Ochs and Roessler (2001) compared the vocational readiness of adolescents with disabilities with the vocational readiness of adolescents without disabilities using the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale Short Form (Betz & Taylor, 1994), the Career Decision Making Outcome Expectations Scale (Betz & Voyten, 1997), the Career Exploratory Plans or Intentions (Betz & Voyten, 1997), and the Vocational Identity Scale of the My Vocational Situation measure (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980). They found that students with a disability responded less to items that would indicate a clear and stable vocational identity than did students without a disability (Ochs & Roessler, 2001). Difficulties in the transition from high school to postsecondary activities are related to the lack of successfully completed tasks of early career development (Ochs & Roessler, 2004).

Early developmental experiences represent a critical focus for counselors given that individuals may lack relevant experiences, develop an attitude that they may not be able to work or have unrealistic expectations or job aspirations (Keith & Stiffler, 2004), or experience alienation for career possibilities through their fantasy and interest substages (Beveridge et al., 2002). This lack of exploratory growth during formative years serves as an early indicator that young adults with disabilities also experience a deficit of work-related skills awareness in later stages of career development and subsequently have difficulty in acquiring, retaining, or advancing in employment (Capella, Roessler, & Hemmerla, 2002).

Social Learning

Research indicates that young adults with disabilities may struggle with psychosocial development, particularly as it pertains to successful transition into the world of work or other postsecondary activities. With respect to career development, social learning emphasizes the importance of the person–environment interaction (Mitchell et al., 1979). Environmental factors heavily influence the skills, vocational attitudes, and career aspirations of young adults both with and without disabilities. Krumboltz’s Model for Social Learning (Mitchell et al., 1979) states that when “persons have poor decision-making skills or a negative self-concept . . . social learning theory encourages exposure to a wide variety of learning experiences to enhance a person’s decision making and to develop self-concept” (Botterbusch, 2000, p. 24). Unfortunately, for students with disabilities, such exposure is dependent on specific disability-related needs (e.g., medical involvement, physical barriers) as well as on psychosocial interactions with peers, family members, community, and professionals.

Contributions of family, community, and culture are integral to psychosocial needs and self-perception, particularly as these contributions pertain to career development. For example, depending on the medical severity of the disability, individuals may experience a greater dependence on medical personnel and members of their family and develop less autonomous behaviors (Coakley et al., 2002) compared with their peers without a disability. Self-perception is influenced here as well; negative social learning experiences early in life can leave a young adult with a disability feeling devalued or degraded (Martz, 2003). Opportune contexts for occupational development of children with disabilities include their communities and families. For this reason, chances for vocational growth can be most influenced, either positively or negatively, by the environment with which one is most familiar (Mpofu & Wilson, 2004). Community and family perception of disability may also affect career growth opportunities and cultural expectations for a child with a disability.

Work Adjustment

Like the social learning theory of career development proposed by Mitchell et al. (1979), the work adjustment theory of Dawis and Lofquist (1984) also establishes the importance of the relationship between individuals and their interaction with their environment. This emphasis, however, is on the interaction between the work personality (i.e., attitudes, values, needs, abilities, and skills) and the consequences (i.e., work choice, satisfaction with choice). Here, reinforcement, by means of both intrinsic (e.g., recognition, responsibility) and extrinsic motivators (e.g., working conditions, compensation) may influence the manner of work adjustment and success of adjustment to the world of work (Mitchell et al., 1979).

Students with disabilities identify different patterns of personal interests and activities, as well as postsecondary training after high school (Chambers, Rabren,

& Dunn, 2009). Young adults with disabilities, however, may not be aware of personal strengths and limitations (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000). Research indicates that several factors also influence one's work personality. Attribution of the problem source to the environment, employment expectancy, locus of control, motivation to work, perception, and attitudes are confounding factors with respect to actual employment outcome for people with disabilities (Saunders, Leahy, McGlynn, & Estrada-Hernandez, 2006).

The work adjustment theory is one of the only theories that has successfully been applied to people with disabilities (Mitchell et al., 1979). It is likely that the success gained from this theory is related to the integration of person and environment. One such contributing factor to understanding career development with young adults with disabilities is that disabilities vary greatly and affect each individual in a unique way in terms of adaptation, adjustment, and career development. Both the disability itself and the individual's response to the disability must be considered to best understand and implement appropriate interventions. Using a comprehensive approach to career counseling with young adults with disabilities will enable the counselor to take such factors into consideration.

INTERVENTIONS

Although appropriate career counseling interventions are important for students both with and without disabilities, parents, educators, and counselors should work together to take into consideration the theoretical tenets associated with the comprehensive model. Some basic questions to consider include the following: (a) What is the individual's disability? (b) How does the disability affect functional limitations of the student? (c) How are the student and the family adapting to the disability? and (d) How can exposure to career development activities be modified to consider these components? By taking these key things into consideration, professionals and families can address appropriate activities for early career development, integrate appropriate social learning opportunities, and understand the interaction between the person and the environment as it pertains to vocational goal setting.

Early Career Development

Early career development activities implemented during elementary school and into middle school should incorporate both the student with the disability and their immediate family. Families should be encouraged to become familiar with federal and state regulations regarding the education of children with disabilities and to work with their school to ensure that career counseling is provided within the Individualized Education Program (IEP; Beale, 1999). Given the importance of these early developmental years, career exploration activities that are available as a part of the school curriculum, such as informational interview-

ing, guest speakers, career fairs, assemblies, and integrated career information into the already predefined curriculum, would aid in providing all students with a broader focus of career opportunities. For this reason, a comprehensive guidance program that addresses career development needs of students at an elementary and middle school level is most effective when it incorporates career exploration opportunities such as these (Schultheiss, 2005).

Optimal career development activities can be sought through several outlets, including the incorporation of such activities throughout the school day and within the family constructs either at home or at school. Beale (1999) suggested that parents can aid their children in career development by encouraging them to think about what jobs they may like; sharing books, magazines, and pictures that introduce types of careers; and talking about jobs performed by family and friends. As the child enters middle school, other activities that facilitate career growth include specific chore responsibilities in the home and volunteering in the community (Beale, 1999). Again, these basic activities should provide a framework for career development opportunities and should be modified to address specific physical and developmental needs. For example, including children in such activities as grocery shopping, budgeting, or preparing meals may allow them myriad opportunities to understand different career choices. For children who have physical disabilities, ensuring that transportation needs are met and that kitchen items are accessible would be important to consider. These early employment opportunities can be influential in future success related to occupational outcomes (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Many career development interventions provide a sound beginning for youth with disabilities.

Similar assignments and discussions can be replicated in the classroom, such as assigning specific classroom duties to promote responsibility, asking students to interview adult friends and family members or other workers at the school to obtain career information, and integrating career mindedness into other subjects to explore possibilities that use core concepts like science and math. It must be effectively communicated to family members of a child with a disability that career exploration activities during these early stages of education are essential to the development of an integrated vocational identity and successful postschool outcomes. Beginning as early as middle school, students can benefit from explicit instruction in skills that increase independence, expand opportunities for job advancement, further the development of peer relationships, and improve judgments of their competence (Carter & Lunsford, 2005). Because some students with disabilities may receive assistance through learning support or special education, it is important not to exclude them from such exposure.

Transition

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 has provided a foundation for transitional planning to begin for students with disabilities at age 14, with stipulations for concrete goals written within the

IEP by age 16. Although the concept of systematic vocational planning was developed within the past 50 years (Halpern as cited in Morningstar, 1997), available literature indicates that services available to students with disabilities as they transition often vary from site to site, with little consistency in what may be provided (Morningstar, 1997). Intervention strategies often identified as being most efficacious to students with disabilities include resources available through career centers, individual counseling, interest testing, career fairs, workshops, and campus interviews (Friehe, Aune, & Leuenberger, 1996). Other variables that may influence success in postsecondary vocational activities include having two or more work experiences during high school, exiting high school with advanced social skills, and exiting high school with job search skills (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997).

Transition intervention for students with disabilities ought to be an outcome-oriented process resulting in employment (Levinson & Ohler, 1998). Although similar interventions are provided to students without disabilities, special consideration must be given to students with disabilities. Taking into account the potential challenges that some students with disabilities may face in career decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal skills, transitional activities must help youth prepare for the world of work by effectively addressing and strengthening a known weakness in any of these areas. Parental involvement and community agency collaboration are also key components to fulfilling these specific needs, which may not be as crucial for students without disabilities. Collaboration with outside professionals who work to ensure successful transition for students with disabilities is also a vital component to effective career counseling. This includes those individuals commonly a part of the IEP team, such as the school counselor, school personnel, the student, and the parents, as well as counselors working with vocational rehabilitation and transition specialists (Herbert, Lorenz, & Trusty, 2010).

Unfortunately, most career counseling interventions are not effectively addressed until high school. Because younger students with disabilities are already developing an occupational self-concept, it is ideal to incorporate career education and exploration at a much earlier age than 14 years. Schultheiss (2005) contended that “by the time students reach high school, where most school-to-work initiatives are encountered, students may have already severely compromised their options, disregarded the relevance or importance of school-based learning, or dropped out of school altogether” (p. 185). For this reason, available interventions, often found only at the high school or postsecondary level, may not be meeting the immediate career development needs of younger students. Career intervention activities that promote exploration opportunities for students with disabilities prior to age 14 would promote the development of self-efficacy, career decision-making skills, and interpersonal skill sets during formative years and would assist high school students moving through transition in making more effective vocational choices (Beveridge et al., 2002).

Many of the career exploration activities for students with a disability are the same types of activities that will also help students without a disability in determining career options. Adaptations would likely be determined on the basis of the disability, the specific needs of the individual, and physical or developmental difficulties. The concept at this impressionable age is to introduce career concepts that encourage autonomy and future independence. Restriction of career development during school directly influences both quantity and quality of college education (Luzzo, Hitchings, Retish, & Shoemaker, 1999). Although historically students with disabilities were often encouraged to find a specific job that related to their capabilities (Morningstar, 1997), this short-term focus tends to overshadow long-term career fulfillment and the potential for vocational growth (Shahnasarian, 2001). Current trends, however, reveal a more individualized approach to be most beneficial.

CONCLUSION

Career counseling theories, such as those that address career development across the life span (Super, 1980), social learning factors (Mitchell et al., 1979), and work personality (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), provide a strong foundation for identifying core concepts along the continuum of career development for young adults with disabilities. Developing an integrative approach to career development for individuals with disabilities takes into account their unique needs in relation to career exploration opportunities, medical demands, and identified societal and environmental barriers. It is essential to take into consideration all these factors to provide optimal service to clients.

The counselor must be skilled at working collaboratively not only with the student but also with the family, vocational rehabilitation specialists, and medical teams to ensure optimal outcomes. Family, culture, and community represent a majority of career development experiences and opportunities for young adults with disabilities (Mpofu & Wilson, 2004). Psychosocial constructs of disability must also be viewed from an integrative approach in assessing individual strengths and limitations as well as the environment in which an individual lives and functions. The counselor must be prepared to address sensitive issues within the family and be skilled at providing encouragement and support through positive career exploratory opportunities for the individual from early developmental years and into high school and postsecondary experiences. Individualized career planning modules for young adults with disabilities will allow for greater opportunities for growth and occupational success.

It is also essential for counselors to be knowledgeable about environmental and societal barriers that can be present in working with young adults with a disability. Awareness of available interventions and appropriate resources also aids in assisting young adults with disabilities in identifying vocational goals, engaging in career exploratory activities, developing problem-solving and social

skills, and becoming autonomous. Counselors should also be prepared to draw from a vast body of knowledge of career development theory and be able to effectively apply it when working with young adults with disabilities and their families. Collaboration with other agencies, including medical personnel, proves beneficial in arranging for appropriate services, setting up accommodations, advocating for clients and families, and empowering clients to continue to grow on the path of career development and make smart career choices.

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