

In Illinois only 38% of individuals with disabilities age 21-64 are employed compared to 81% of individuals without disabilities (Erickson et al., 2020). One reason for such employment disparities may be due in part to lack of work experience during high school. Work experience encompasses any activity where students are placed in real work settings that provide opportunities to learn about various careers, job preferences, work behaviors, and specific work skills (Luecking & Crane, 2020). These experiences should be developed based on the student's preferences, interests, needs, and strengths, and align with the student's postschool employment goals. An important first step for students before engaging in work experiences is career exploration. Providing students with opportunities to explore a variety of careers can help identify potential interests that will shape the types of work experiences students sample prior to exiting school.

What is Career Exploration?

Career exploration (also referred to as job exploration) is a way for transition personnel to briefly introduce students to a range of work settings to assist them in making decisions about potential career paths or vocations (Inge et al., 2017). It entails learning about a variety of career options, recognizing the pathways to those careers, and reflecting on careers aligned with individual interests and skills. Career exploration necessitates both knowledge of self and the world of work, and how both interact to achieve necessary and desired outcomes (Porfeli & Skorikov, 2010). Engaging in career exploration requires students to identify (a) what they want and need, (b) a job that appeals to them, and (c) what they can offer the world of work in exchange for what they want and need. Choosing the right career is believed to be highly dependent on the nature and extent to which students engage in career exploration to find meaningful answers to these questions (Porfeli & Skorikov, 2010).

What the Research Says

According to career development theory, students begin to develop career awareness during elementary school. As they move from elementary school into middle school there is a shift from awareness to exploration (Morningstar & Clavenna-Deane, 2017). Career exploration often begins with self-assessments that identify personal and work values. Evaluating interests, values, beliefs, and strengths that are related to the features of work settings is part of the exploration process (Denault et al. 2019). According to Ellevan and colleagues (2006) career exploration should assist students with disabilities to:

- Research various occupations and careers.
- Recognize their individual interests, skills, and capabilities.
- Identify what employers expect while learning the importance of relevant job skills.
- Recognize the academic, technical, and personal skills needed for specific jobs.
- Recognize every job is associated with a different type of work culture and environment.
- Develop a better understanding of the career opportunities available.

More importantly, career exploration allows students to make decisions about the career or vocational fields they are interested in pursuing. This information is then used to build a transition plan in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP; Cease-Cook et al., 2015) and identify an appropriate course of study that is centered on the student's strengths and interests.

Exploring careers allows students to assess their interests and skills in relation to various occupations. When exploring careers, students should not limit their search to just one career; rather, they should focus more broadly on areas of interest. For example, a student may look at jobs in the legal field but not a specific type of law. Examining certain parts

of the job and aligning it with students' interests and skills can expand rather than narrow job opportunities (Repetto, 2012). Moreover, exploring career clusters (i.e., careers within the same field requiring similar skills) early in a student's high school career (rather than specific jobs) will allow students to investigate various options within their area of interest. As students explore career clusters, they begin to recognize and understand the nature of work, the characteristics of today's workforce, and the differences in working environments (Godbey & Gordon, 2019).

Guidelines for Practice

Career exploration is frequently accomplished by having students participate in a variety of activities. Cease-Cook et al. (2015) describe several possible activities, such as:

- Touring local businesses that are of interest to the student.
- Interviewing employers about their business.
- Hosting career days with invited local businesses or volunteer organizations.
- Attending career fairs with college admissions offices, college disability services, employers, and employment agencies.

In addition, educators can teach students about careers and help them process what they are learning from their career exploration activities. Cease-Cook et al. (2015) suggest:

- Teaching students how to collect and systematically record information about careers during exploration activities.
- Having follow-up discussions with students about what they learned from each career exploration activity.
- Locating lesson plans on career awareness through vocational websites and aligning them to standards within the curriculum.
- Consistently pointing out connections for students between what they are learning, and career and life applications.

Information learned from career exploration activities forms the basis for determining the types of work experiences students experience. There is no limit to the ways in which students can explore potential career options. Although typically most career exploration occurs in middle school and early high school, it may be an ongoing activity for students as they gain work experience and reconsider their employment goals.

Additional Resources

Transition Tennessee Career Awareness and Exploration Online Resources

transitiontn.org/downloadable/career-awareness-and-exploration-online-resources/

This website provides links to online resources on career awareness and exploration curricula.

Illinois State Board of Education Career Exploration Toolkit

www.isbe.net/Pages/middle-school-cte.aspx

This toolkit introduces 16 career clusters. Career exploration activities and teacher lesson plans are provided to introduce students to career options.

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