

Making Community-Based Work Programs Work for Students with IDD

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Session Objectives

- Identify factors related to successful community-based work experience (CBWE) programs for students with IDD
- Describe system- and school-level strategies to support CBWE programs
- Discuss implications for practice in developing and maintaining successful CBWE programs



What do we know about CBWEs for students with IDD?

- Students with IDD participate in CBWEs that are entry level where they can earn minimum wage, work part-time, and receive no benefits
- Students receive support from:
 - Teachers
 - Paraprofessionals
 - Co-workers
 - Peers
 - Case managers



What do we know about CBWEs for students with IDD?

- Students with extensive support needs are less likely to participate in CBWEs than their peers with fewer support needs
- Students who participate in CBWEs are more likely to be employed after graduation and have a greater quality of life



What are key features of CBWEs for students with IDD?

- **Meaningful**
 - Individualized; intentionally–selected tasks; sustained engagement, opportunity to earn \$\$\$
- **Instruction**
 - Use of systematic instruction at the worksite and school; consistent assessment of student’s work performance; embed accommodations; behavioral supports
- **Support Network**
 - Job coaches, employers, families, VR providers
- **High Expectations and Dignity of Risk**
 - High expectations for students; opportunities for students to make their own decisions, experience authentic consequences, and learn from their choices



Our Current Study

Purpose: to illuminate community and school factors that facilitate or hinder successful CBWE programs

Participants: high school special education teachers or vocational coordinators who planned and implemented a CBWE for a transition-aged student with IDD within the last 5 years

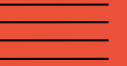
Procedures: virtual interviews analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures

| Gender | | Race/Ethnicity | |
|----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|------------|
| Female | 18 (80.0%) | White | 19 (95.0%) |
| Male | 2 (10.0%) | Black or African American | 1 (5.0%) |
| Education | | Role | |
| Bachelor's | 4 (20.0%) | Special Ed. Teacher | 11 (55.0%) |
| Master's | 15 (75.0%) | Transition Coordinator | 7 (45.0%) |
| Doctoral | 1 (5.0%) | Location | |
| Grade Levels Taught | | Rural | 2 (20.0%) |
| 9th | 12 (60.0%) | Suburban | 8 (40.0%) |
| 10th | 14 (70.0%) | Urban | 10 (50.0%) |
| 11th | 15 (75.0%) | School | |
| 12th | 15 (75.0%) | Integrated | 13 (65.0%) |
| Post-secondary | 15 (75.0%) | Segregated | 7 (35.0%) |

| Type of CBWE | |
|---|------------|
| Work sampling | 3 (15.0%) |
| Service Learning | 5 (25.0%) |
| Internship | 9 (45.0%) |
| Paid Employment | 3 (15.0%) |
| Individuals who Plan/Implement CBWEs | |
| Other Special Ed Teachers | 11 (55.0%) |
| Vocational Coordinator | 5 (25.0%) |
| Voc. Rehab Counselor | 4 (20.0%) |
| Job coaches/Paras | 4 (20.0%) |
| Other outside agency | 2 (10.0%) |

| Locations | Job Tasks |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Musical theater camp for kids• Restaurants• Park Districts• Pre-Schools• Recreation Centers• Museums• Grocery Stores• Retail Stores• Homeless Shelters• Hotels | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clean• “Face” shelves• Greet customers• Organize and sort materials• Hang clothes• Repair work• Stock shelves• Monitor children• Manage carts |

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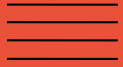
Findings



01

District-level Infrastructure & Administrative Support





Infrastructure & Administrative Support

Critical components included:

1. District systems and structures
2. School-level administrative support
3. School- or district-provided transportation





District-Level Systems & Structures

- Systems and structures at the district level determined whether programs were resourced and viable long term
- When supportive, teachers shared that districts:
 - Secured formal agreements with businesses
 - Fielded questions about insurance and liability
 - Acquired additional staff to support CBWE programs



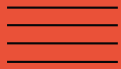


District-Level Systems & Structures

- Katelyn described how transition specialists were hired to connect with businesses, create CBWE opportunities, and navigate transportation for students, sharing:

“So, I didn’t have that pressure... everything was set up by them... as a teacher, you don’t have to do all of that.”



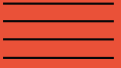


Administrative Support

- Building-level administrators trusted teachers to design their own programming and provided the autonomy and flexibility to do so

“Our principal let us redesign the afternoon. Three students, three sites. It worked because we weren’t tied to a strict bell schedule.” (Blake)





Administrative Support

- Principals fulfilled basic compliance tasks, remaining largely uninvolved in program design or execution
- Others actively contributed to the success of the program by:
 - Writing grants
 - Visiting job sites
 - Recruiting businesses
 - Redirecting or securing funds to pay students





When Leadership Changes Create Challenges

- Frequent changes in leadership slowed program creation and expansion



Points to Consider & Questions to Discuss

- Program-level conditions are central to CBWE success
- Administrative and district support are critical for sustainability
- Inconsistent infrastructure elements can limit program equity across schools

How do we get buy-in from key school/district leaders?





02

Community Contexts



Community Contexts

Inclusive Communities

Open-minded communities where students are welcomed and safe

Diverse Worksites

Variety of opportunities that match student interest and goals

Supportive Employers

Partners who balance compassion with high expectations

Public Transportation

Reliable ways for students to reach work experiences independently



Inclusive Communities

- Within inclusive communities, partnerships were easier to develop
- Inclusive attitudes of community members facilitated program expansion and sustainability

Brenda described her community as **“eclectic”** and **“open minded,”** noting, **“I think that allowed us to place a lot of kids in [CBWEs] and allowed our kids to be accepted as who they are.”**



Diverse Worksites

- Teachers emphasized the connection between diversity *across* worksites and the creation of individualized, meaningful programming
 - Darla – **“We want to create an environment where students know that they can do different things and have the opportunity to experience and learn about different jobs.”**
- When diverse worksites were unavailable, teachers sought to diversify activities *within* available worksites



Diverse Worksites

- Worksite and task diversity
 - Promoted student engagement
 - Fostered individualized programming
 - Allowed students to explore and develop career interests
- Regardless of how teachers incorporated worksite or task diversity within their program, goals remained the same:
 - To provide students with options
 - To move away from stereotypical work roles for students with IDD



Supportive Employers

- Supervisors who were accustomed to working with individuals with disabilities often created welcoming and flexible environments

“... the park district is pretty great because they’re used to working with individuals, adults with disabilities in different capacities. So, a lot of the people that work there are just naturally accommodating to different disabilities.”

– Darla



Supportive Employers

- Created a balance between understanding students' support needs with holding them accountable

“[The employer was] compassionate to our students’ needs, but at the same time, had those high expectations for them during training.” – Maggie



Public Transportation

Access to public transportation was inextricably linked to educators' community contexts as well as the success of their CBWE programs

- **Urban advantages** – access to multiple bus and train lines created opportunities for students to reach diverse worksites and develop independence
- **Paratransit solutions** – teachers in suburban/rural areas relied on publicly funded paratransit services for CBWEs
- **Rideshare solutions** – some programs formed partnerships with local organizations that provided free ride share services



Barriers to Program Success

Limited or Reduced Transportation

- Without buses, trains, or paratransit options CBWEs were severely limited
- Negatively impacted program development and access to worksites

Employer Hesitancy

- Often related to liability, safety policies, or misconceptions about students' abilities
- Prevented teachers from securing CBWEs aligned with students' career interests

“We have students that want to be nurses... but trying to find a place that will allow our students to go in and volunteer... not allowed...” (Jenny)



Barriers to Program Success

Limited or Reduced Transportation

- Without buses, trains, or paratransit options CBWEs were severely limited
- Negatively impacted program development and access to worksites

Safety Concerns

- Lack of safety within communities made it difficult to get students to certain worksites

Employer Hesitancy

- Often related to liability, safety policies, or misconceptions about students' abilities
- Prevented teachers from securing CBWEs aligned with students' career interests

"... it just wasn't safe for us to be dropped off on the corner and then walk halfway down the street to get to the work location." – Abigail

Points to Consider & Questions to Discuss

- Creativity is important in matching student interests within community contexts
- Partnerships are more likely to happen in inclusive communities
- Employer reluctance and misconceptions can limit worksite diversity

How can these findings influence our approaches to developing strong employer partnerships?



03

Teacher Beliefs & Program Practices





Teacher Beliefs & Program Practices

Critical components included:

1. Core beliefs about CBWEs
2. Persistence and advocacy
3. Relationship building
4. Program design
5. Paraprofessional capacity





Core beliefs about CBWEs

- **Transformative impact** – teachers consistently emphasized that CBWE programs were an essential service
- **High expectations** – teachers grounded their programs in believing students could achieve more than others might expect
- **Inclusive access** – teachers spoke about how CBWEs were available to all students, regardless of behavior challenges or support needs



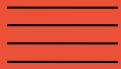


Persistence & Advocacy

- Building programs often depended on teachers' determination to cultivate opportunities, refuse to accept initial refusals as final

“Unless I put in the effort, my kids won't have those opportunities... one 'no' is one 'no,' but there could be 15 yes's out there.” (Kristen)





Building Relationships

These relationships were central to:

- Shaping employer perceptions
- Expanding available placements
- Supporting program growth

Educators spoke about creating these relationships by:

- Ensuring clear communication
- Gaining front-line buy-in
- Gradually expanding the program





Program Design

- Teachers sequenced activities and environments to gradually increase student autonomy and stamina
- Developed a program scope and sequence that could be tailored to individual student needs and interests





Capacity of Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals expanded program capacity by:

- Providing instruction in real time
- Supervising students
- Communicating with employers and teachers about student progress

Well-trained, motivated paraprofessionals provided trust and reliability to manage diverse worksites





Capacity of Paraprofessionals

Strong buy-in from paraprofessionals created more consistent, student-centered programming

- Shea – “She is the same job coach that was with him last year, and I think that consistency has been really good.”

Specialized training for job coaches improved program quality

- Kristen – “They were a paraprofessional, but they had specific job coach training so when they were in the job site they were able to provide that specialized support.”





Barriers to Program Success

Lack of collaboration

"We needed a transition assessment... districts would say, "We don't need to do that..." so we would do a lot on our own, just because it need to get done, and I didn't have the certification."

Training Gaps

"Job development...is not anything you get from your special education master's degree... you have to think of things like on the business end... none of that is really brought up."

Time Intensive

"It takes a lot of planning. I started planning for this year in April, just to make sure everyone had their jobs mapped out for August."

Limited Staff

- Limited staff impacted teachers' abilities to individualize CBWE programs
- Only specific staff (e.g., retired teachers) could support students at worksites



Points to Consider & Questions to Discuss

- Teacher persistence and advocacy expanded opportunities
- There is a lack of teacher and paraprofessional preparation for specific CBWE factors (job development, addressing liability, program logistics)

What types of training or support might teachers and paraprofessionals need to enhance their knowledge and skills to successfully implement CBWE programs?





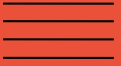
Implications for Teachers/Coordinators

- **Advocacy is key** – teachers' persistence often transformed initial employer hesitancy into long-term support
- **Collaboration sustains programs** – transition personnel, paraprofessionals, and families are essential to building comprehensive CBWEs
- **Intentional design matters** – programs that scaffold student exposure are more sustainable
- **Structural barriers must be addressed** – coordinators should anticipate and plan for gaps in transportation, funding, or admin support



Limitations

- Based on teachers' perceptions of facilitators and barriers to CBWE programs
- Teachers were predominately White
- Teachers were not recruited based on the quality of CBWEs they provide
- With all qualitative research, these findings may not generalize to all teachers and coordinators of students with IDD who provide CBWEs



For more about implementing CBWEs

Check out our paper!

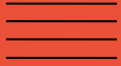




UMSL Transition Program Opportunity

- Graduate certificate or Master's Program in Transition Studies
- **Fully Online**
- Program director: Magen Rooney-Kron

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Thanks!

Do you have any other thoughts or questions?

Feel free to reach out!

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