Career-Related Needs of Schoolchildren with Severe Physical Disabilities

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In this article career-related problems of children with severe disabilities are discussed. Ameliorative measures that can be taken by school counselors are presented.

After the passage of PL 94-142 and the resultant mainstreaming of children with disabilities into the public school system, an additional responsibility was placed on school guidance personnel. Huckaby and Daly (1979) outlined many of the activities of children with disabilities that require school counselor involvement. These activities range from participation in the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to the provision of career education programming to meet the special needs of this population.

As Hohenshl (1979) indicated, however, in a special issue of the Personnel and Guidance journal devoted to counseling handicapped persons and their families, school counselors have not been trained sufficiently to deal with these matters. In fact, the purpose of that special issue, which was published because of concern about the consequences that could arise from lack of school counselor competency in dealing with handicapped persons, was to provide essential knowledge required in counseling this population.

Although no current assessment of school counselor preparation in the area of disability is available to determine whether significant strides have been made to provide more adequate training, deficiencies still seem to continue. For example, numerous unmet career counseling needs of students with disabilities were revealed by a National Science Foundation project (Career Planning and Placement Center, 1981). More recently, I was impressed by the number of elementary and middle school counselors who personally expressed concern over their lack of competence in this area during conversations at the 1983 National Elementary/Middle School Guidance Conference. In this article I review some career-related problems and needs of students with severe physical disabilities and suggest solutions to some of the problems.

DISABILITY AND VOCATIONAL AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Because a review of the related literature revealed no commonly accepted definition of career or vocational awareness, these terms will be understood here to mean, in the broadest sense, a knowledge of jobs, vocations, occupations, and careers and the ability to relate this information to aspirations, interests, abilities, and the prevailing environment. No distinction is made between vocational and career awareness development, and the terms are used interchangeably. Furthermore, in examining the vocational and career problems of students with disabilities, it is essential that a developmental perspective be taken. It is generally accepted that the bases of career awareness and choice are, to a large extent, shaped by childhood experiences that support the developmental process (Neff, 1968). People are exposed to the world of work at an early age through contact with working family members and other role models, media exposure, the educational system, and early work experiences. These experiences affect interests and knowledge of careers and provide the foundation for future career pursuits. These factors also are salient components of the vocational or career development process.

Theorists such as Super, Holland, Ginzberg, and, most recently, Gottfredson (1981), have devoted considerable time and energy to dissecting the processes that underlie vocational and career development and to establishing their interrelationship. Conte (1983), however, pointed out that of these theorists, only Super has alluded to the implications of disability with regard to vocational development, and his discussion is limited to an acknowledgment that disabilities may pose problems for vocational development without helpful explication. Conte also noted that there has been relatively little disability-focused research in the vocational development area. Consequently, explanations of many of the career-related problems and needs of students with disabilities must rest on analogue and assumption, rather than on empirical evidence.

Despite the large inferential leaps that must sometimes be taken to relate the theories to disabling conditions, the applicability of the theories seems straightforward in many areas. For example, two issues discussed by Gottfredson are perceptions of occupational accessibility (i.e., opportunities or obstacles in one's environment that may affect the chances of one entering a specific occupation) and the role of social strata in shaping career awareness. The stereotyped occupational tracks in which students with disabilities are often placed are possibly an outgrowth of perceived accessibility, and the inferior and deviant social status afforded those who are disabled seems to relate to the lowered expectations and underemployment to which they are frequently subjected (Bowe, 1978).

Examination of these relationships can be useful in understanding both the theoretical concepts and the plight of persons with disabilities. More important, actions that can enhance the vocational or career situations of persons with disabilities are often implicit in the resultant understanding. The following exploration of some of the major career-related problems of persons with disabilities is the outcome of such an examination. It must be remembered, however, that persons with disabilities are individuals, each having a unique set of characteristics and experiences, and that rote application of the following paradigms can be as deleterious as the problems themselves.
DISABILITY-RELATED PROBLEMS

One of the problems experienced by students with disabilities, which reflects the possible disruptions in career awareness development outlined by Harrington (1982) and others (Career Planning and Placement Center, 1981), is that they arrive at adulthood with relatively few career options. Ginzberg (1972) stressed the importance of young people maximizing potential options. In effect, having a number of open career options helps to ensure career satisfaction and success because it affords the individual greater opportunity to seek out and find a satisfactory job. An understanding of why children with disabilities may experience career-related developmental discontinuities and delays (Sinick, 1979) can be derived from an awareness of the differences between their world and that of their non-disabled peers. For children with severe disabilities (e.g., blindness, deafness, or orthopedic problems) that limit their interaction with the environment, the differences can be quite pronounced.

Severely handicapped students (e.g., those disabled by cerebral palsy) often have a restricted number of early experiences (Easton & Halpern, 1981), which, together with other disability-related factors, leaves them "boxed in" with regard to their career choices. For example, they sometimes arrive at their career decision point with few options because of their very narrow or limited learning experiences. In a similar vein, Link (1975) believed that some blind people reach their career decision point without having acquired enough related knowledge to make an appropriate choice. As a result, they may have unrealistic aspirations (Salomone & McKenna, 1982).

The career-related experiences of disabled children may be disrupted or diminished by several factors. Mobility problems (e.g., those necessitating reliance on a wheelchair for travel) diminish their ability to get out of the household or institution and thereby limit their acquirement of knowledge about neighborhood surroundings and happenings. Additionally, some children with disabilities are deliberately shielded from the outside world by the protective attitudes held by many parents and guardians (Wright, 1960). Preoccupation with treatment of the disabling condition can also detract from the amount of time available for world exploration by the child (Kutner, 1971). Finally, there are some disabled children who have been confined for most of their lives in isolated institutions with little or no contact with the outside world. The result of these situations is that disabled children are extremely limited in their exposure both to the world in general and to the world of work.

Proponents of career and vocational development theory based on social learning models emphasize the importance of one’s social climate, especially role models, in career decisions (Osipow, 1983). Children with disabilities are frequently exposed to atypical role situations and models. When a child is disabled, he or she often requires unusual amounts of care, which is generally the domain of the mother. Connor, Ruselman, and Cruice (1971) reported that families of children with cerebral palsy are at risk for breakdown and that when the family remains intact, the father may disengage himself from the disabled child. Seligman (1983) indicated that when a disabled child has siblings, care is frequently relegated to a sister.

In essence, the child will probably be reared in a much more matriarchial home environment than is typical. Not only is this true of the home environment, but if the children are undergoing treatment for a disabling condition, they are plunged into another world disproportionately represented by women. Data from one report (Research and Analysis Division, 1983) put the female to male ratio in the health services at more than 5:1. Although this skewed environment may not cause the child difficulty in adjusting, it can create an inaccurate role perspective. Because of their extensive exposure to the helping professions and their limited general world experience, children with disabilities may acquire a distorted or narrow view of the world of work and of work roles and relationships.

The protectiveness and dependency often imposed on children with disabilities can leave other potentially damaging marks. These circumstances can result in social immaturity, particularly with regard to decision making (Bartel & Guskin, 1981) and problem solving (Roessler & Bolton, 1978). Immaturity is enhanced or fostered by the authoritarian characteristics of the treatment environment, in which all decisions are made for the child, even in advanced years (Kutner, 1971). Treatment is ordered, and the child is expected to comply. Placements and other activities are similarly prescribed and expeditied by adult "experts." Parents may also contribute to immaturity by holding their disabled child less responsible than a nondisabled child for his or her behavior (Roessler & Bolton, 1978). One of the ramifications of social immaturity is that it can easily be confused with limited mental ability. In fact, it has been suggested that limited life experience may actually contribute to depressed scores on measures of mental ability (Connor et al., 1971). Consequently, the child is seen to have relatively limited competency, and a vicious circle ensues. Such attitudes toward children with disabilities are all too common among both parents and helping professionals. When this attitudinal set results in all of the children’s decision-making responsibilities being usurped, they are denied the practice that leads to competence and independence (Wright, 1960).

When the child has a dearth of experience in assuming personal responsibility, he or she may also have been deprived of much of the stimulation that leads to thinking about becoming self-sufficient, employed, and so forth. When deprived of this stimulation, children with disabilities are, at best, likely to assimilate little career information. At worst, most incidental career learning opportunities will go completely unnoticed.

The same factors that limit personal responsibility and decision making among children with disabilities extend into the school environment. Lowered performance expectations for disabled students have commonly been found among teachers and other school officials (Career Planning and Placement Center, 1981). When such expectations are present in parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and others involved in the educational process, they can lead to restricted or limited learning experiences that are devoid of "hard" subjects, including the sciences and advanced mathematics. Unfortunately, the same attitudes marked by lowered expectations are assimilated by the children, who, in turn, lower their own aspirations (Bartel & Guskin, 1971). Ultimately, they underachieve and have a limited career foundation, which may later wreak havoc on their futures.

Another school-related problem to which children with disabilities may be exposed is the limit in the number of field trips incorporated into their curricular activities (Steen & Redden, 1981). These limitations stem from the difficulties encountered in carrying out these activities with children who have significant mobility or communication problems and other previously mentioned factors that result in restricted world experiences. For children limited to homebound instruction, field trips and subjects such as the laboratory sciences may not even be considered. The ramifications for the child’s career choice options are obvious.

Children who sustain disabilities in their later school years are equally susceptible to these problems. They may also experience confusion about their future career choices because they have been left with an uncertain identity or self-image (DeLoach & Greer, 1981). At best, they undergo a period of uncertainty because they have not had time to learn accurately
or completely all the ramifications of their disabilities (Meyerson, 1971). As Trieschmann (1980) reported in her book on spinal cord injuries, it is not unusual for 2 or more years to elapse before a person begins to feel comfortable with such a disability. Consequently, recently disabled persons may be prone to overrating or underrating the career implications of their problems. They may select career goals without considering the difficulties that will stem from their situation, or they may perceive themselves to be much more limited than they really are. This is especially true when the newly disabled student has not had the opportunity or time to become familiar with ways of circumventing disability-created problems.

Furthermore, my experience suggests that sometimes adventitiously disabled students are highly suggestive because of the desperate state they see themselves in. Also, they are likely to unquestioningly accept career advice and to grasp any straws held out to them. Often they will begin to pursue any career that seems feasible, without concern for the satisfactoriness of the goal. These problems underscore the need to restrain from being too conclusive in dealings with the newly disabled student. In some instances a prolonged adjustment period may be required before the student is able to participate realistically in the career decision process (Athelstan, 1981). It is essential that the student have a good grasp of who he or she is as a disabled person and an accurate picture of what the world of work holds before commitments that are difficult to reverse are made.

There are other specific factors that can affect the career outlook of children with disabilities. The lack of role models in the form of persons with visible disabilities in the workplaces children visit can have a profound impact on their sense of what they can and cannot do (Career Planning and Placement Center, 1981). If one has never seen a teacher, banker, carpenter, or physician with a disability, the logical conclusion is that these careers are out of the realm of possibility. This problem is compounded by the fact that the disabled child’s nondisabled peers are likely to have come to the same conclusion. Thus, peer pressure can reinforce the disabled child’s erroneous perceptions. When the child with a disability does express an interest in a career and the peer response is, “You can’t do that. I never saw a disabled teacher,” this opinion is difficult to disregard. Seeing is believing, and if no one has ever seen one, then it must not be feasible.

Although there has been an increase in the attention given to persons with disabilities by the media—1980 was designated as the International Year of the Disabled—the role models presented often have been of questionable merit (Bowe, 1978; DeLoach & Greer, 1981). There seems to have been a shift from the earlier portrayal of disabled persons as hideous, dependent, and pathetic beings to a portrayal of them as “supercripples.” The image presented is that of a person overcoming insurmountable obstacles with Herculean efforts and inexhaustible amounts of grit. For the disabled person with average abilities, motivation, and stamina, these portrayals send the message that she or he probably does not have enough to make it. Rarely, if ever, do the media portray characters with disabilities that are coincidental and irrelevant to the plot and suggest that disabled persons succeed as average “Joes” and “Janes.”

Existing assessment problems also contribute to underestimation of disabled students’ abilities and potential. Their inability to read, write, or speak clearly and efficiently makes it difficult to obtain accurate standardized test results. Persons with these communication handicaps can be expected to perform poorly on most of these measures (DeLoach & Greer, 1981). Ultimately, the test interpreter must rely mostly on personal judgment to give appropriate weight to the scores. The usual impact of a severe disability is to lower performance on these tests, resulting in underestimation of disabled persons’ capabilities.

All of these factors support the notion that career planning may be of greater importance to persons with severe disabilities than to those who are not disabled (Lynch & McSweeney, 1982) and underscore the need to begin career guidance and education at the earliest possible time, from elementary school on. Severely disabled children seldom get an opportunity to engage in part-time employment (e.g., delivering newspapers), in which work-oriented values can be acquired and enhanced. As Bowe (1978) suggested, failure to assimilate these values can create an additional handicap. Thus, there is a need for alternative experiences. Not only should the child with a disability be given the attention necessary to overcome the problems cited above, but he or she should be equipped to handle other career-related considerations. For example, if it is apparent that the child is going to require costly lifetime support (e.g., medical or attendant care), he or she must be sensitive to the relevance of salary in career planning. Similarly, the disabled child should be taught to notice the mobility and strength requirements in jobs affected by the disability. In the main, specific restrictions that may legally exclude them from some jobs should be brought to their attention.

Problems also abound for the disabled student who is ready to make a career choice and is receiving counseling. Salomone and McKenna (1982) stated that counseling practices may be affected by institutional or agency objectives. Specific problems are not documented, and their sensitivity probably precludes research and publication, but the author, who is disabled, and a number of his peers with disabilities can attest to the existence of several.

One problem is that the disabled person is often placed in a predicament in which he or she is given only one chance for advanced education or training; in essence, he or she is denied the right to fail. There may be a great need for and dependence on financial support from government agencies for vocationally focused pursuits because of the financial devastation heaped on the disabled child’s family. On the one hand, the financial support is probably crucial to most disabled students’ career pursuits; on the other hand, policy usually dictates that the limited governmental or other agency resources be spent most prudently. Prudent sometimes means that if disabled persons fail at their first career attempts, then their names must go to the bottom of the list (if not completely off) for any future support. They are considered to have had their opportunity. In the end, such policies place the disabled person in a sink or swim predicament. Because of the reality of this situation, some counselors tend to guide or direct disabled clients into training or educational programs in which chances of success are virtually certain. Career aspirations that entail any risk are discouraged, including those that are likely to test the upper limits of the person’s abilities.

Finally, because resources are insufficient to meet the needs of all persons with disabilities, there is an often reported practice of counselors consciously or unconsciously discouraging the individual from pursuing a long-term, expensive program. A more subtle kind of discouragement results because financial aid is frequently awarded by agencies that have policies discouraging expenditure of funds outside the state boundaries, and the disabled person may not be able to attend the most suitable education or training program or may not achieve his or her career goal. Unfortunately, other resources (e.g., academic scholarships, basic education grants, and loans) that could solve some of these problems are frequently overlooked because of the reliance on programs specifically intended to serve disabled persons.

CONCLUSION
At this time, career education, guidance, and counseling for children with disabilities is as much an art as it is a science. In
addition to limited attention being given to career issues relevant to the disabled population, this state of affairs is largely attributable to social changes that have occurred because of legislation such as PL 94-142 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the current technological explosion. The legislation has broadened the spectrum of educational and career opportunities open to persons with disabilities. Additionally, technological developments, especially those based on microprocessors, are making it possible for disabled persons to circumvent their problems and perform jobs heretofore considered unfeasible (e.g., science-based professions such as engineering). Increasingly effective methods are being developed for persons to compensate for their handicapping condition, such as the use of microcomputer-based voice synthesizers and electric wheelchairs.

On the other side of the career opportunity picture, the workplace is becoming more benign to employees with disabilities. Not only are the kinds of opportunities increasing as a result of the legislative mandates already mentioned, but new opportunities are arising because the workplace is shifting from primary dependence on physical labor to more reliance on technology and information processing. The advent of computerized business activities has increased the number and variety of sedentary jobs, but even many aspects of heavy manufacturing are now controlled and carried out from a computer console that is linked to a robotic-based production process.

A concern for sustaining elderly employees in the workplace is also likely to emerge soon. With the demographic shift toward a larger percentage of older persons, it is necessary to begin reshap ing the workplace to accommodate older workers. The same modifications that will be needed to make this change (e.g., diminishing reliance on physical strength and stamina) are also likely to accommodate persons with disabilities. All these changes make it very difficult to predict what careers or occupations will be realistic for the child with a disability.

Because of these changes and the continuing trend toward mainstreaming disabled children into the regular schools, there is an urgent need to bring career education, guidance, and counseling up to date for students with disabilities. Regrettably, in too many instances these services are lagging or lacking, especially for the young child. Consequently, as a study sponsored by the National Science Foundation (Career Planning and Placement Center, 1981) has indicated, many disabled students reach their career decision point (i.e., completion of high school) and find themselves unprepared to pursue their career choice. How can the disabled student pursue a college program in engineering, for example, if she or he has not taken the requisite higher mathematics or laboratory sciences in high school?

Ample rationale has been presented here and elsewhere (Brolin & Gysbers, 1979) for implementing programs beginning at the elementary school level. Disability-imposed restrictions suggest the development of career awareness programs with varied foci. Included should be emphasis on field trips into workplaces from which persons with disabilities are often excluded. Exposure to role models who are disabled is crucial not only for disabled and nondisabled students, but for parents, teachers, and counselors as well. This exposure can be gained by planning field trips to sites where disabled persons are employed and by bringing disabled persons into classroom and school assembly programs. Audiovisual materials are also becoming available for use (e.g., see Feingold & Miller, 1981; Felt & Ticchi, 1976). Additionally, various programs associated with disabilities, including career and vocational implications, seem to be legitimate material for social studies classes (Shaver & Curtis, 1981). Finally, the restricted exposure to the world of work experienced by many disabled children can, at least in part, be compensated for by enriched occupational exploration programs implemented by guidance personnel.

Guidance counselors must also recognize the need to assume an advocacy role on behalf of disabled students to help ensure that they are guided into appropriate educational tracks (i.e., courses that will ultimately maximize their career options). This advocacy role includes helping the disabled child to exercise his or her right to take risks, often synonymous with taking difficult courses, and helping to secure the child’s right to fail and to begin anew when failures occur. Finally, as one study has reported, a group of scientists indicated that the crucial factor underlying the choices and attainment of their career goals was the continuing support of at least one significant person who encourages self-explore and risk taking (Career Planning and Placement Center, 1981). It seems incumbent on those working with disabled children to find ways to ensure that such support and encouragement are provided.

REFERENCES


THE WOMAN FROM THE LUMBEÉ TRIBE

The Indian woman sits in her chair. She has ripped her petticoat, winds the unraveled threads into a ball and begins to crochet with a broomstraw. She likes to turn pages in a book but we can’t keep anything to read. It gets torn to pieces, to eat, or, if it’s the Bible, to make cigarettes.

I move a chair to sit close to her but she bristles and pulls hers away, then runs to check all the doors to see if one has been left unlocked. Just as suddenly she starts to dance the Charleston in slow motion, barely nudging the floor with one toe to keep turning around.

She used to smear and eat feces but we started her in a new group and she is smearing fingerpaints in a picture with a statue in an underwater scene. When we got a mirror for our building and took her to see herself, she said, I don’t know who I am.

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