

School supported work placements for students with intellectual disabilities: Why
inclusive principles/principals matter!

Tiffany L. Gallagher, Sheila M. Bennett

Department of Teacher Education, Brock University, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

This article offers considerations for principals and other educators as they seek to provide students with intellectual disabilities (ID) with authentic work placement experiences. Survey and interview data gathered from 20 employers, 7 paraprofessionals (job coaches), a principal, and 21 students with intellectual disabilities provide a triangulated perspective from which to view supported and successful work placements. These perspectives offer recommendations for coordinated, collaborative and belief-driven action on the part of high school principals that will enhance the opportunities for successful community engagement beyond high school for students with intellectual disabilities.

All the life skills classes in the world have not prepared the young men and women who have intellectual disabilities to share in a community life (Principal of Programs – Special Education).

High school graduates with intellectual disabilities (ID) often face a pronounced challenge to find meaningful, well-paying and sustainable employment (Butcher & Wilton, 2008; Winn & Hay, 2009). This population of graduates with disabilities falls well below the Canadian national employment rate as only 20% of student graduates find paid employment, while their peers with intellectual disabilities remain in unpaid employment (Galambos & Leo, 2010). This trend of unemployment is also present in other developed countries such as the United States (Certo, Luecking, Murphy, Brown, Courey, & Belanger, 2008) and Australia (Winn & Hay, 2009).

The challenge of preparing high school students with intellectual disabilities for employment is not a recent one; school districts/boards have been grappling with how to best facilitate the transition from student to employed and productive member of the adult community (Neubert & Moon, 2006; Rogers, Lavin, Tran, Gantenbein, & Sharpe, 2008). One strategy is to provide supported school to employment transitions for young adults with intellectual disabilities in the form of authentic work placements. Such focused initiatives that provide supportive employment opportunities during secondary school have demonstrated successful outcomes for students with regard to sustainable employment (Rogers et al., 2008; Shandra & Hogan, 2008).

What does it take to facilitate the successful transition from secondary school to community-based work placements for students with intellectual disabilities? The

implementation of programs that provide effective work experience for students with intellectual disabilities is founded on inclusive belief systems and the services and support of multiple partners. The coordination of this support is often encompassed within the role of an inclusive school administrator. This article outlines multiple perspectives from which to view and support work placements for students with intellectual disabilities. Data gathered from a principal, employers, paraprofessionals (job coaches) and the students themselves provide a triangulated perspective from which to view successful practice. These perspectives offer recommendations for coordinated, collaborative and belief-driven action on the part of high school principals that will enhance the opportunities for successful community engagement beyond high school for students with intellectual disabilities.

A review of the literature on school leadership and inclusive practice reveals a wealth of scholarship with regard to the development of social justice leaders for schools to establish an inclusive school environment (Ryan, 2006), support teachers (Boscardin, 2005; Ryan, 2006) and espouse personal, inclusive beliefs (Praisner, 2003). Missing in the literature is a discussion of the relationship between the role of the secondary school administrator and work placements for students with intellectual disabilities. By providing insights from the students themselves, job coaches, employers and a principal, this paper provides a glimpse into the practical and sometimes surprising realities of students in employment settings. These realities are fashioned into suggestions for secondary principals to consider as leaders of inclusion as they ponder the question: What principles should high school principals bear in mind for school supported work placements for students with intellectual disabilities?

Program Foundation and Description

The fundamental principle of the program that is featured here is that students with intellectual disabilities are fully included in school, home, work and community settings. This resonates with the definition of inclusive education that states that educators welcome and include all learners in the regular classroom, in the neighbourhood school with their age peers and foster the participation of all learners in socially valuing relationships and to the fullest possible development of all learners' human potential (Crawford, 2005). The program evaluated here fulfills the characteristics of effective inclusive schools that offer: a supportive environment, opportunities to participate, positive relationships, and promotion of feelings of competence (Specht, 2013).

Researchers collaborated with senior school board staff of an urban school board to examine the work placement program for their students with intellectual disabilities. Since the late 1960's, the school board has had an established inclusive philosophy built on the assertion that all children will learn and with the assumptions that they have unique needs, abilities, interests, and ways of learning. This philosophy is captured in their vision statement, "Each Belongs." Over the past 40 years, this school board came to recognize that inclusion meant more than putting classmates with disabilities in the same classroom as other students. Educators and parents in the school board started to realize the absolute importance of social relationships in the process of inclusion. This included school trips, athletic events, dances, assemblies, fund raising projects, community volunteering, and ultimately, employment. These were not academic or programming domains; these domains tapped informal learning skills such as social acceptance,

relationship building and essential preparation for post high school life. Teachers and administrators worked to define and formalize meaningful informal learning opportunities that would support all facets of inclusion.

Beginning over 20 years ago, this school board has focused attention on its job experience program that facilitates the employment placement and transition of students with intellectual disabilities through job coaches (school support staff). This program is premised on the need to provide students with meaningful work placements, support on their job performance and offer guidance for future vocational goals. The students are supported in their work placements by job coaches who typically, at the beginning of a work term, provide intense on-site support. This scaffolding is gradually withdrawn as the students gain familiarity and competency on the job. Job coaches are specially trained educational assistants dedicated to work experience transitions. They work to ultimately establish significant community relationships and networks that the students will need post-secondary school. The work placements often include restaurants, schools, senior citizens' residences, retail stores, and office settings.

Methodology

This research sought to garner perspectives on how high school students with intellectual disabilities transition into work placements with the goal of identifying promising practices. The voices of students with intellectual disabilities were a primary data source in this examination of the factors that bridge secondary school to independent work. Their community employers and educators that support them were also integral informants.

Participants

Principals from seven high schools with job experience programs agreed to allow their schools to participate. While data was collected from a larger number of participants which included teachers, educational assistants and peers of students with intellectual disabilities, the information reported here includes those groups directly related to employment: the students with intellectual disabilities (n=21); job coaches (n=7); principal of programs (special education) (n=1); and employers (n=20).

The high school students with intellectual disabilities (ages 16-21) were interviewed about a broad range of topics such as their school experiences, friends, family, and work placements. These students ranged in terms of intellectual disability (mild to profound) and some were non-verbal and not ambulatory. It should be noted that some of the students with intellectual disabilities required help from their educational assistants for interpretation of the interview questions.

The seven job coaches were employed by the school board and were responsible for liaising with community employers and supporting the students in the workplace (half a day, five times per week). The job coaches (1 female; 6 male) gauged the amount of support that they provided to their students. Typically, at the beginning of a work term, intense support was required and then this was gradually withdrawn as the students gained familiarity and competency on the job. Most of the job coaches had 6-10 years of experience (n=4). This role was regarded with high esteem within the school board.

The principal of programs (special education) was responsible for the supervision and evaluation of the job coaches. He met with them on a monthly basis to discuss their successes and challenges, and to intervene with employers, schools or

parents if difficult situations arose. Promoting team building, collaboration and self-determination among the job coaches was important for this principal. He did not get involved in the daily activities of the job placements for the students, except for knowledge of the placements, and occasional communication with employers. This principal had over 25 years of experience.

The community employers (18 female; 2 male; majority between the ages of 20-40 years) were the supervisors of the students with intellectual disabilities that hosted their student work placements in the community. Most of the employers (n=13) had 3-10 years of experience in the workplace and prior experience hosting students (n=6, less than 3 years; n=6, 3-5 years; n=4, 6-10 years; n=4, 11-20+ years).

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of both interviews (students with intellectual disabilities; principal of programs) and surveys (job coaches and employers). The students with intellectual disabilities were asked about school, their classmates and friends, their family, and work. The researchers constructed these questions as a series of prompts that the students responded to on a scale of agreement (agree-no opinion-disagree) and then the students were asked to provide elaboration (when they were able). Questions included such topics as, "I enjoy being at school," "My classmates are nice to me," "I like my job," "I am good at my job."

The principal of programs (special education) was queried about the school board's position on inclusion, principals' role in supporting inclusion, the background of the work experience program, his role in this program, and the relationships between high school principals and their program staff. The survey for the job coach participants

included 32-questions on a 4-point Likert scale (of agreement-neutrality-disagreement-not applicable) and queried them about school climate, educators, students with disabilities and their colleagues. This survey was adapted from two instruments: Sprankle (2009) and Riegert (2006). Items for the present study asked participants questions such as, “I can make local and work context accommodations for students with disabilities,” “I feel that I can make a difference in the life of a student who has a disability,” “I can adequately assess the progress and performance of most students who are in work placement settings.”

Finally, the community employers’ 20-question, 4-point Likert scale (of agreement-neutrality-disagreement-not applicable) survey was comprised of questions related to interactions and experiences with inclusion. Examples of questions from this survey which was adapted from Gething (1991) are: “After frequent contact I find I just notice the person and not the intellectual disability,” “I don’t judge a student with an intellectual disability,” “I am aware of the problems that people with intellectual disabilities face.” Factor analyses (Forlin, Fogarty, & Carroll, 1999) confirm the reliability of this scale with various participant samples.

Data Analysis

The students’ and principal’s interview responses were audio recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were independently reviewed and coded by the two researchers. Recurring themes were identified and the researchers compared these categorical themes to the survey item sub-topics. For the job coaches’ and community employers’ surveys, simple descriptive statistics were calculated based on the reality that the sample sizes were small. Since response category, “not applicable” was not selected

by any of the participants, it was excluded, thus leaving a 3-point Likert scale (of agreement-neutrality-disagreement).

Findings

Findings from the data were clustered into four areas of interest: attitudes and belief about inclusion, supporting placements/fostering independence, workplace competence and workplace dynamics. Each of the four findings addresses the question: What principles should high school principals bear in mind for school supported work placements for students with intellectual disabilities? The information presented is a subset of the overall findings from this project with the intent to inform high school principals' decisions with respect to work experience program delivery.

Attitudes and Beliefs about Inclusion

Survey data items queried overall beliefs and attitudes towards inclusive practice. Both job coaches and employers reported positive attitudes towards inclusion. Job coaches felt that the overall philosophy of the school board was well established and well supported and that having diversity in the workplace was beneficial. Similarly, employers expressed overwhelmingly positive attitudes about the inclusion of students in the workplace noting that as they get to know the students they simply notice the person and not the intellectual disability. *Table 1.* is a sample of survey items related to attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and the job coaches' and employers' degree of agreement.

Job Coaches	
General education students benefit socially from their interactions with students with disabilities	100% agree
I am aware of my school's philosophy about including students with disabilities.	100% agree
I feel that I can make a difference in the life of a student who has a disability	86% agree
Employers	
I feel uncomfortable and find it hard to relax around a student with intellectual disabilities	90% disagree
I don't judge a student with an intellectual disability.	90% agree
After frequent contact I find I just notice the person and not the intellectual disability.	70% agree

Table 1. Survey items: Attitudes and beliefs about inclusion

Students' interview data relating to attitudes towards their own workplace inclusion was more difficult to extrapolate. Some of the participants were non-verbal or had limited vocabulary. Overall, during the interviews, students expressed satisfaction with their work placements and felt as though they belonged. Taylor and Jordan express their perceptions of their co-workers' acceptance.

What do you like about your job?

Taylor: I like one of them [jobs]. One of them is my favorite. It is the [charitable foundation], they've got nice people, they know me... I'd like to [permanently] work there.

What do you like about your job?

Jordan: Oh well everybody's really, really nice. Trust me, if somebody was not nice I would not want to work there.

The principal of programs (special education) commented on how administrators established a culture of inclusion in their school sites. His response was grounded in the reality that the school board's vision statement was embraced by the high school principals, "All school principals understood that 'Each Belongs' was the only option. At times, some didn't always agree and we certainly had discussions, but generally 'Each Belongs' prevailed." In addition to this he noted that school principals had a great deal of respect for the school board's senior administration who made inclusion a priority – consequently, fostering a culture of inclusion in their school sites was consistent with the messaging coming from the school board and its administration.

What principles should high school principals bear in mind for school supported work placements for students with intellectual disabilities? A work experience program needs to be a practical extension of the school board's philosophy of inclusion and accordingly, the educators (e.g., job coaches) that support students need to genuinely believe in this inclusive mission. Community employers need to be chosen for their humanistic qualities and authentic respect for an individual's contribution to the workplace.

Supporting Placements and Fostering Independence

An integral finding for this research project was whether job coaches and employers felt that they were equipped to support students with intellectual disabilities in workplace settings. Overall, both job coaches and employers felt that they had the necessary training and skills needed to provide positive and meaningful placements for students. *Table 2.* includes a sample of survey items that reflects the job coaches' and employers' ability to support students in the work place.

Job Coaches	
Job Coaches are equipped to support all students in job placements.	71% agree
I feel adequately prepared to offer support to a wide variety of learners using the general principals of employment	71% agree
I can make local and work context accommodations for students with disabilities	86% agree
Employers	
I feel unsure because I don't know how to behave around a student with an intellectual disability	75% disagree
I feel ignorant about people with intellectual disabilities	80% disagree
The Job Coaches are helpful to support the needs of the student with an intellectual disability in the work place.	95% agree

Table 2. Survey items: Supporting placements and fostering independence

In their interviews, students with intellectual disabilities expressed confidence in their abilities and recognized that they received appropriate supports from their job coaches as well as their employers. They also expressed a desire to extend their work into adult life and a strong notion that they could work independently. The role of the job coach in terms of transitioning students into a skill set and fostering independence at the job site certainly seemed to play out in terms of the students' self-evaluation of competence. Dale, Reece and Taylor's responses are indicative of this perception.

How does your job coach help you?

Dale: um... She helps me at [name of fitness club]... I'm good at cleaning, help the trainer, and they help me wipe down the equipment, and at [name of discount store] I stock the food and do my aisle checks.

Do you have a job coach?

Reece: Yeah... I'm getting, I'm getting rid of her. I'll tell you, I don't really need her, because I can do it my own self... I've got it all in my head.

Who helps you the most at work?

Taylor: Well, I needed some (assistance from job coach) at first but I don't need any more.

The principal of programs (special education) acknowledged that the work experience program had, by design, set up the necessary supports for students with intellectual disabilities in the workplace. The role of the job coach was customized as they:

...were all former educational assistants, with formal course and experience working with students with intellectual and/or physical disabilities. Despite this fact, the ideal program would be one using co-operative education teachers, but they are not necessarily special education trained and might not have the experience with some of the challenges faced by students with intellectual disabilities...I have not found any other school board that has been able to implement this ideal solution (Principal of Programs – Special Education).

What principles should high school principals bear in mind for school supported work placements for students with intellectual disabilities? Job coaches need professional preparation to understand and respond to the work place context that their students will be immersed into. School environment accommodations may need to be adapted to these

work place contexts. Employers may require preparation to receive student employees with intellectual disabilities and the scaffolded support from job coaches.

Workplace Competence

When asked whether students with intellectual disabilities were competent and had the necessary skills to be successful in the workplace, job coaches expressed confidence in their ability to make these judgments as well as in the notion that employment opportunities were positive and worthwhile for students with intellectual disabilities. Employers were also positive noting that they were aware of the difficulties students in their workplace might have and they admired students' ability to adapt and cope. They also noted that while job coaches played an essential role, students with intellectual disabilities could work independently once their skills were established. Employers indicated that they were aware of and prepared to support the needs of people with intellectual disabilities in the work environment. Survey items related to perceptions of workplace competence are summarized in *Table 3*.

Job Coaches	
I feel comfortable including students with disabilities in a work placement setting.	100% agree
I can adequately assess the progress and performance of most students who are in work placement settings	100% agree
A students with multiple disabilities can benefit from and achieve Individual Education Plan objectives in a work placement setting	57% agree
Employers	
I am aware of the problems that people with intellectual disabilities face.	75% agree
It hurts me when a student with an intellectual disability wants to do something on the job and can't	45% agree
I admire a students with an intellectual disability's ability to cope on the job	80% agree

Table 3. Survey items: Workplace competence

In the case of the students themselves, they evaluated their own work-related competency with a great deal of positive confidence. Students Drew, Jessie, Dale and Casey succinctly summarize their work related tasks and the ease with which they execute them.

Do you bring them (files) to the people's rooms?

Drew: yes.

Is your work hard or easy?

Drew: It's easy.

What did you find easy about the job?

Jessie: The explaining of everything because I played basketball all the time so I already knew all the skills so it was easy to go this that that. It was easy to show the technique.

What did you find hard about the job?

Jessie: Trying to get them [the children] to pay attention [laughing]. When you work with grades 4 to 6's they really don't want to pay attention [laughing].

What do you do you at [name of fitness club]?

Dale: Me? Cleaning, I find dust and office clerk...I bus food and take it into the back.

Is your job easy?

Dale: yes.

Is it easy or hard?

Casey: I'm independent.

The principal of programs (special education) clarified that the role of the job coach was similar to a scaffold: a temporary structure erected to ultimately build independence. "Support meant just that, support, and not something more like a permanent shadow for the student." He added that it was integral for principals to truly understand this and give their job coaches dedicated time to this role instead of calling on them to perform other educational assistant-type duties. He concluded that principals had to, "accept the fact that job coaches' roles were different and important in themselves."

What principles should high school principals bear in mind for school supported work placements for students with intellectual disabilities? The goodness of fit between a student with an intellectual disability and their work placement contributes to a sense of competency. Together, an informed principal, job coaches and employers support students with intellectual disabilities as they learn job-related tasks and execute them, however, workplace independence is the ultimate goal. Students with intellectual disabilities who achieve a degree of independence are confident and proud of their performance.

Workplace Dynamics

Within the complex workplace environment, positive interactions and dynamics among co-workers are important. While job coaches expressed the benefits of diversity in the workplace, they were unsure about the impact that students with intellectual

disabilities would have on their co-workers. Employers expressed their own confidence in their ability to interact positively with their employees who had intellectual disabilities.

Questions that related to perceptions of workplace dynamics are presented in *Table 4*.

Job Coaches	
Individuals without disabilities can benefit when a student with a disability is included in a work place setting	86% agree
Non-disabled co-workers lose support and supervision time as a result of the super/employer spending more time with students with disabilities	43% disagree
General education students are more accepting of students with disabilities as a result of interactions in the workplace	71% agree
Employers	
I try to act normally and to ignore the disability when I am working with a students with an intellectual disability	70% agree
I can't help staring at individuals with intellectual disabilities	90% disagree
I try to make contact only briefly with a students with intellectual disabilities	75% disagree

Table 4. Survey items: Workplace dynamics

The following comments from the interviews with the Drew, Jordan and Casey provide insight into their perceptions of work dynamics and their relationships with their employers, co-workers and clients.

Do you like who you work for?

Drew: yes

Are they nice to you?

Drew: yes

How about at work? Do you have friends there too?

Drew: Yes

Tell me about the person who helps you the most out work?

Jordan: At work? Well that would have to be my supervisor, J—.

What does she help you with?

Jordan: She helps me if I have a hard time with the residents. She helps me because some residents they don't talk and I don't know sign language so I don't understand what they say

Do you like your employer? Do you like who you work for?

Casey: Yeah?

Does your employer help you? A little bit?

Casey: [Yes,] like [with] anything.

The principal of programs (special education) also added that board initiatives such as this work experience program for students with intellectual disabilities had the unsolicited support of parents and teachers within the board. These individuals, while not directly involved with the operation of the program, saw the inherent benefits for all in workplace and community inclusion:

Many parents, not necessarily parents of children with exceptionalities provided lots of support, from the most outspoken champions of inclusion to those parents who felt that inclusion was the right thing to do. And since we have been doing inclusion for around 40 years, many teachers and principals had 'grown up' in an inclusive environment (Principal of Programs – Special Education).

What principles should high school principals bear in mind for school supported work placements for students with intellectual disabilities? Principals need to bear in mind the basic principle that inclusion benefits everyone. Students with intellectual disabilities, students without disabilities, co-workers, employers and clients/customers should all be a part of a functional workplace dynamic; each participant stands to benefit from inclusive interactions with other participants.

Discussion

Schools share a common mandate to prepare students to become participating adults within society. Accordingly, transition into the workplace marks a critical juncture for students in their educational journey. This juncture is one that encourages educators to reflect on what is needed to provide students with the knowledge and skills to succeed. It is particularly important for principals and educators to be well-informed about the provision of inclusive work opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. Students with intellectual disabilities need to be given multiple opportunities to gain independence not just in school settings but in employment settings as well. This speaks to the ultimate goal of inclusion in the community:

Inclusion is a way of thinking and acting that permits individuals to feel accepted, valued and secure. An inclusive community evolves constantly to respond to the needs of its members. An inclusive community concerns itself with improving the well-being of each member. Inclusion goes farther than the idea of physical location, it is a value system based on beliefs that promote participation, belonging and interaction (Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001).

As a function of this research, it has become clear that a strong philosophical orientation toward inclusive practice provides a vantage point from which to view students in inclusive workplace settings. It has been established in the literature that principals play a pivotal role in establishing a culture of inclusion within a school setting (Theoharis, 2007; Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999). It is also important that leaders establish an inclusive community that provides the foundational skills for students with intellectual disabilities and affords them opportunities for the development of social relationships with fellow co-workers. Community exists when students have social involvement in both school settings and sustainable employment (Abbot & McConkey, 2004; Winn & Hay, 2009). The current findings from the employers' data are supported by research in the field: the more exposure to a student employee with a disability, the more the person is socially accepted and seen as an individual rather than an individual with a disability (Praisner, 2006).

The development of supportive networks and skill sets that foster employment opportunities is also essential. School principals can be instrumental in developing a culture of collaboration and skill development within their schools and communities (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). Employers expressed a confidence in their interactions with students with intellectual disabilities and that the role of the job coach was beneficial. Job coaches, in this study, felt they were well trained and expressed confidence in their ability to carry out their supportive role. Supporting educators and paraprofessionals to provide assistance to students with intellectual disabilities is important but so is the encouragement of independence.

The students interviewed in this research felt competent, accepted and confident in their abilities. They expressed a desire for independence while also recognizing the positive aspects of being supported. Finding the balance between independence and support is essential for a successful work placement experience. Principals need to be aware that this does not start when students with intellectual disabilities enter the workforce. Activities that contribute to both academic and social independence need to be fostered throughout students' educational careers - administrators can do much to facilitate this.

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