

Introduction to Special Issue

Autism Spectrum Disorders: Transition and Employment

Rob is 19 years old. He spent his first year of life on a respiratory monitor. By age 2, he was very active and fussy. As he grew, his communication and social skills lagged behind his peers. He avoided interacting with the other toddlers at the ‘mother’s day out’ program. He frequently paced carrying only a rope and a toy truck. He did not play with the truck; instead he would spin the wheels for a few moments and jump up and down. By the time he entered kindergarten, Rob cried and hit others whenever he was told ‘no’, when his routine changed, and when he was forced to move through a transition between activities too fast. By the age of 5, Rob’s doctor said that he had autism.

Through school, Rob has acquired many skills. He reads at about the 4th grade level, is skilled at basic mathematics, is in his high school’s Junior Officers Training Corp and sings in the High School Chorus. Having been born in 1990, Rob is at the front of the wave of youth who have an ASD diagnosis. In many ways, he and his same aged peers blazed the trail for those with the diagnosis who followed him. He was among the first children to have the advantage of better special education services in his public school. He received excellent speech therapy services that likely resulted in his acquiring spontaneous communication. He received his education in a mix of special education self contained and general education classes. He learned communication and social skills by being with his peers in a variety of activities. For example, he is the manager of his high school’s football and soccer teams. He even got to play in the state championships enough times to earn a ring.

When Rob was born in 1990, the estimated prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) was 4 to 5 in 10,000. Today, the recorded prevalence of ASD is estimated at 1 in 110 (CDC, 2009). Because of the dramatic rise in these numbers, the published literature that should guide practice in transition and employment supports has not kept pace with the needs presented by individuals with ASD like Rob.

Yet again, as he reaches the last years of high school, Rob and his peers will blaze a new trail. The trail that helps define best practice for transition aged youth like him. Rob and his peers will teach us again, about their disability. Specifically they remind practioners about the intensity of services they continue to require. They remind us how important it is to use highly structured, behaviorally sound instructional methods, to assure generalization of skills to natural environments, and to use data to assess the success of instruction. They help us revolutionize the work place so that they can access visual supports and comprehensible environments. They also teach us how important proactive planning and behavior supports are to their success at work.

Some of the lessons that Rob and his peers teach us will serve us well as we strive to improve our services for this group of young adults in transition and at work. At the same time, Rob and his peers face a number of perplexing issues as they prepare for their transition to work and adulthood. As they face transition, some of the questions they face include how to implement those intensive supports at work and in the community. Specifically, how do students like Rob access those supports from their community? How do they

collaborate with other agencies and across disciplines? How can direct support providers implement behavioral and other workplace supports without compromising the business environment? How can technology assist teams supporting individuals with ASD at work? What specific strategies and training methods encourage the most independence and self determination at work?

Thus, the purpose of this special issue is to explore these issues and the practices that will assist providers and researchers in supporting youth and adults with ASD, like Rob, as they transition to adulthood. The first article by Schall and McDonough presents a description of ASD in adolescence and adulthood through the perspective of 3 case studies. These case studies present the experiences of three different individuals, one with autism, one with pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified and the third with Aspergers Disorder. Then, McDonough and Revell explore the benefits available to transition aged youth with ASD. This topic is important to teams that support youth with ASD to help them implement intensive services by exploring potential funding sources. McDonough and Revell provide creative and innovative methods for using state and local agencies and organizations to develop services.

In the third article, Gentry, Wallace, Kvarfordt, and Lynch describe the innovative use of personal digital assistants for high school youth with ASD. Their research in the use of handheld devices promises to change the way practitioners implement visuals schedules and other such visual and organizational supports. Handheld devices match adolescent culture and provide support in a unobtrusive way in a work environment, making them ideal technology for meeting the scheduling and visual support needs of workers with ASD.

Next, Schall presents a review of Positive Behavior Support and discusses specific issues related to implementation of PBS in the workplace. She includes a case study to illuminate the discussion as it relates to serving individuals with ASD. She emphasizes the importance of contextual fit between behavior strategy and the workplace. This issue is an important one for future research as it relates to successful employ-

ment for persons with ASD. Another issue that is frequently a barrier to successful transition is collaboration between vocational rehabilitation and educational agencies.

In that context, Chappel and Somers discuss the importance of team collaboration across agencies in supporting transition to employment for youth with ASD. During their discussion, they review important legislation that presents the argument for increased collaboration between school and vocational rehabilitation agencies.

The final article in this special issue by Hendricks provides an overview of the current state of supported and competitive employment for individuals with ASD. In her review, Hendricks includes a synthesis of the published literature around the benefits of employment for individuals with ASD, the current state of employment, obstacle to employment, current service options for youth with ASD, and strategies for successful supported and competitive employment.

Jennifer McDonough and I would like to thank Dr. Paul Wehman, editor of this journal, for the opportunity to guest edit this special issue. We are also grateful to the authors who contributed pieces for this issue. This issue represents a step forward for youth and adults like Rob who need evidence based services and skill practitioners to implement those services.

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