



Choice and Work-Based Learning: Information for School Personnel and Families of Students with Disabilities

Introduction

The opportunity to make choices about employment is often limited for people with disabilities. Choice of employment consists of a person having a variety of experiences and options to identify and set their goals. If individuals are to be satisfied with their jobs, they must be given support to explore work opportunities. Webster's dictionary defines choice as:

..... the act of choosing, selection, the right, power, or chance to choose, option;

..... choice implies the chance, right, or power to choose, usually by the free exercise of one's judgement.

If we explore the definition of choice, we may think about words like “option,” “alternative,” and “selection.” The word “option” suggests that the choices are decided by someone in authority. The word “alternative” suggests picking between one of two possibilities. The word “selection” implies wider choices. We want to give the job seeker with a disability as much control and as many possibilities as we can. Allowing a person control over their job choices means giving that individual the ability to freely make decisions.

Consider the following questions!

- Do you give your students the "privilege" of choosing based on your authority or opinion? This can limit a student's choice-making.
- Do you provide alternatives and ask students to choose between one of the two alternatives? In this instance, the student may pick an option but that doesn't mean it reflects their wants or needs.
- **Or, do you provide a wide selection that helps students meaningfully and carefully decide between choices?**

One way to encourage choice related to employment is to assist students with participating in a variety of work-based learning experiences. This helps them learn about their interests, preferences, and options for work.

Things to Consider About Choice and Work-Based Learning Experiences

- Poverty of Experiences
- Informed Choice
- Tendency to Prefer What is Familiar

Poverty of Experiences

There are a number of things that may impact students' choices for employment. First, they may not know much about work and competitive integrated employment. Their work experiences have likely been limited and in places that don't provide much interaction with other people who do not have disabilities. In other words, they may have what could be called a "poverty of experiences." They don't know what work choices to make because they don't know or understand what work choices are available beyond the scope of their restricted experiences.

So, it should not be surprising if students respond with "I don't know" when asked what they want to do for a job. We may assume that they will be happier only working with other people who have disabilities than working in a more integrated setting within the community. We may also assume that they don't have the skills to be employed in competitive integrated employment. Students need to know about and understand the choice(s) they have in order to make decisions about their own employment future. **This is called informed choice.**

Things to Consider About Informed Choice

- Have students participated in work-based learning experiences?
- Were these experiences in a variety of businesses?
- Did students interact with workers who do not have disabilities?

Informed Choice

Participation in work experiences helps students learn about employment and develop their career goals. Work-based learning uses facilities, materials, coworkers/employees, and/or tasks within a business to assess and teach employment and related skills (e.g., social, health and safety, communication, etc.). Teachers and school staff provide applied instruction within a business instead of at the school. Therefore, instruction is community-based and **not** simulated work. These

experiences assist students in identifying work interests, preferences, and skills for career possibilities. These experiences are not just observation or participation in field trips. Instead, they allow students to have an opportunity to work in natural settings where people without disabilities complete their jobs. **Participation is critical to having an informed choice about work.**

Tendency to Prefer What is Familiar

It is not unusual for people to make choices based on things that are familiar to them. For instance, as students near graduation, they may pursue a familiar choice by going to an agency where only other people with disabilities work. Perhaps the student or family does not know anyone with a disability who has graduated and is working in competitive integrated employment. The unknown might seem to be a “risky” choice.

When asked what they want to do for work, students often talk about things they have seen on television or online, jobs their relatives or friends have, or a hobby they know about. For example, a transition-age student who was recently asked what he wanted to do for work quickly said that he wanted to be a police officer. His uncle was a police officer. The student also said that he wanted to wear a uniform like his uncle! This is an example of a student who was familiar with a job based on someone he knew but had a limited understanding of the job itself. It is important that the student be given opportunities beyond just police work so he can be sure of what he wants to do for employment through the process of informed choice.

A word of caution should be added here about making assumptions about what a student can and cannot do for competitive integrated employment. The type of work that students could do in law enforcement may be unknown by the teacher, employment specialist, or family members supporting them. Staff must become familiar with and observe potential jobs to effectively find employment for their students. In our example, it would be important that we do not assume that this student would be happy or satisfied doing any job as long as it is in the police station. For instance, a cleaning job in the police station may be arranged for the student because his teachers and employment specialist might not know what other work tasks are possible. The student may not really be interested in cleaning the police station as this isn’t really police work. Teachers and employment specialists need to be creative and find jobs that truly interest a student. Observing and analyzing the workplace is critical for matching students to jobs that bring them satisfaction and success.

Summary

Students who have not had work experience might not be confident that they will be able to work in a community business. Work experiences can provide information about student interests and places to explore for competitive integrated employment. This allows the student to learn about possible jobs and be able to make informed choices about future employment. Research has shown that vocational activities, including work-based learning experiences, are a predictor of successful employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Please refer to other resources from SWTCIE Illinois on how to assist students in achieving their employment goals.

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