

Teaching Skills for Life: A Study in Transition Practices

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Exceptional Learning: K-12

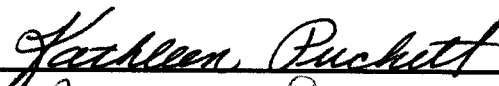
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Section I

Abstract

Postsecondary transitioning is one of the most important topics in exceptional education today. Postsecondary transitioning refers to the transition of students with disabilities from a secondary school setting into a job setting, a vocational training setting, or a postsecondary school. It is now required that a plan outlining the transition of each student receiving special education services be written into that student's Individualized Education Plan, or IEP. The transition plan itself is known as the Individualized Transition Plan, or ITP.

There are many ways to ease the transition from the secondary setting to the postsecondary setting. The purpose of this research is to examine the methods of transitioning. In particular, the research will focus on job training programs within the secondary school setting.

The first part of this project will be a survey of literature pertaining to transition services. The definition of transition services, legislation concerning transition, the Individualized Transition Plan, and best practices in transition planning will be examined. The second part of the examination will be a case study based on Pyramid Industries, a local vocational training program. The paper will examine the history and goals

of Pyramid and analyze information gathered from interviews with Pyramid graduates and their current employers. Using the information cited about Pyramid, practices to improve the quality of services provided at Pyramid will be recommended.

Section II

Defining Transition Services

Transition services are defined by federal law as “a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation” (*Federal Register*, September 29, 1992). Such activities may include instruction, community experiences, development of employment objectives, instruction in everyday living skills, and functional vocational evaluation (Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996). Transition services are provided by a variety of agencies and organizations. Typically, an individual with disabilities will receive transition services from the school that he or she attends; however, additional services may be provided by a community organization.

Transition services fall into two major categories: (a) preparation for postsecondary education (in a college, business training school, or other agency) and (b) vocational training in preparation for postsecondary job settings. Preparation for postsecondary education settings focuses on

helping the student explore possible study and career interests, familiarizing the student with available postsecondary services and agencies, and promoting success in the postsecondary educational setting, which is, in most cases, considerably different from the secondary setting. In addition to promoting study skills and academic functioning, educational transitioning aims to instill self-confidence, creativity, determination, and other related qualities into the student (Bursuck, Durlak, and Rose, 1994).

Vocational training in the secondary setting shares many goals with educational transitioning. In the ideal vocational setting, students are allowed to explore different occupations in order to find a job that is suitable for them. Vocational settings aim to teach students a variety of job skills, including production, efficiency, interpersonal skills, appropriate handling of instruction, customer service, and functional academics, such as money handling and reading labels (Collet-Klingenberg, 1998).

The issue of transition services is one of great importance to the exceptional learning establishment. Often, a student with special needs will graduate from a high school special education program with little or no preparation for the future that lies ahead. Legislation concerning the

transitioning of these students aims to end this unfortunate phenomenon, which often leads to unemployment of adults with disabilities and, ultimately, dissatisfaction with overall quality of life.

Section III

Legislation Concerning Transition Planning

Deshler, Ellis, and Lenz (1996) provide a discussion of laws regarding special education made before 1996. The following is a brief summary of these laws.

Carl D. Perkins Vocational Act of 1984 (PL 98-524)

This act addresses the vocational education of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) as well as the modification of curriculum and instruction in vocational education. Its specific requirements are as follows:

1. Vocational planning and programming must be addressed in the IEP of each student with a disability.
2. The vocational interests, abilities, and special needs of each student must be assessed.
3. Adaptations must be made to vocational instruction, curriculum, equipment, and facilities in order to meet the student's individual needs.
4. The student must be provided with counseling, guidance, and career development activities by professionally trained counselors.

5. All services necessary for a successful transition from school to post-school employment must be provided.

Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act

Amendments of 1990 (PL 101-392)

The amendments to the Perkins Act integrated vocational and academic education. Until this time, vocational education had been taught in separate programs and schools. These amendments allowed greater flexibility for each education agency in structuring and reforming their vocational training programs.

These amendments also established separate funds for secondary and postsecondary vocational education. The amount of funds given to each level can be shifted. Also, the amendments made room for more funding of community/technical colleges and vocational/technical proprietary schools. Finally, the amendments endorsed *TECH-PREP*, which was designed to help students who do not plan to complete college degrees gain the skills needed to function efficiently in technological society.

Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1990 (PL 101-476)

These amendments to PL 94-142 changed the name of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act to the Individuals with

Disabilities Act, or IDEA. IDEA designated two new types of disabilities: autism and traumatic brain injury. Social work was designated as a service related to the education of individuals with disabilities. IDEA required that assistive technology be included in the student's IEP. Finally, IDEA designated vocational rehabilitation services as a related service. In IDEA, transition services are defined as

a coordinated set of activities for a student within an outcome-oriented process, that promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community preparation.(SS 300.18)

IDEA specified that transition services must be addressed in the IEP of any student 16 years of age or older.

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (PL 101-336)

This act, usually referred to as ADA, primarily aims to protect the civil rights of individuals with disabilities in employment, public services, public accommodations and transition, and telecommunication. Specific requirements are:

1. Employers with 15 or more employees cannot refuse to hire an otherwise qualified individual with a disability.
2. State and local governments cannot discriminate against an otherwise qualified individual with a disability.

3. Individuals with disabilities cannot be discriminated against by restaurants, hotels, and retail stores.
4. Buses, trains, and other modes of transportation must be made accessible to persons with disabilities.
5. Persons with disabilities may not be excluded from public accommodations.
6. Telephone relay services used by persons with hearing disabilities must be offered.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997

IDEA 1997 makes two amendments to IDEA 1990 regarding transition.

1. The age at which transition planning is legally required for a student with special needs is fourteen rather than sixteen.
2. One year before a student reaches the age of majority (in most states, eighteen), he or she must be informed of the rights that transfer to him or her upon reaching the age of majority (LD OnLine, 2000).

Section IV

Implications of Transition Legislation

With the advances in legislation regarding special education and transition services, educators have been required to gain a great deal of knowledge about available services in order to prepare a plan that will ease the transition of the student from a secondary to a postsecondary setting. Currently, the law requires that transition services be implemented no later than the student's fourteenth birthday (Collet-Klingenberg, 1997). For most students, this is approximately four years before graduation from the secondary school.

While fourteen is the age at which transition services are legally required, it is usually recommended that transition services actually be implemented much earlier, as students in most states are legally allowed to drop out of high school at the age of sixteen. Given the high rate of discouragement and low self-esteem among students with disabilities, one can assume that the risk of dropping out among these students is much greater than that of students without disabilities. Providing services that will allow the students to explore career options while providing encouragement, job coaching, and other learning situations greatly increases the chance that a student will graduate from high school and go

on to postsecondary success. Students who dropped out of high school generally reported less satisfaction with the transition services provided by their special education program (Love & Malian, 1998).

The implementation of transition services begins with the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). At the time that transition services are set to begin, a new section is added to the IEP; this section is known as the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) (Deshler et al, 1996). The ITP contains all vital information regarding the transition services that will be provided to the student, including (but not limited to) methods of training, facilities, community agencies, and individual service providers. The ITP should also take into consideration services that will be provided to the student after graduation from the secondary school (Beattie, Grigal, Test, & Wood, 1997).

As with the entire IEP, a multidisciplinary team of people should participate in the planning of the ITP. Ideally, the team should consist of parents, special education teacher, general education teacher, school principal, school guidance counselor, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, and any other necessary support staff (i.e. doctors, nurses, physical therapist, occupational therapist, etc.). A recent and very positive trend is

that of including the older student in his or her own ITP planning (Destefano, Furney, and Hasazi, 1997).

Because the ITP is part of the IEP, the goals stated in the ITP should be evaluated on an annual basis at the very least. In order to provide services that will benefit the student, the team must evaluate and revise the procedures used on a regular basis, provide necessary training, and make connections with agencies outside of the school that can provide support services to the students. Failure to review and revise goals and methods of transition on a regular basis can result in failure to achieve what the ITP is intended to achieve (Beattie et al, 1997).

Section V

Planning the Transition

By the standards set by IDEA 1997, each student receiving special education services must have an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) included in his or her Individualized Education Plan (IEP) beginning no later than the student's fourteenth birthday (Collet-Klingenberg, 1998). The planning involved in the ITP process should include goals and objectives related to the in-school activities that will contribute to the transition as well as goals and objectives for postsecondary employment, education, or other activities (Beattie et al, 1997).

The Hamilton County Department of Education requires that, before the actual transition plan is written, the student undergo a comprehensive vocational assessment. The student, parent, and educator must answer a series of questions regarding the student's strengths, skills, interests, etc. A vocational competencies checklist is completed by one or more of the student's teachers. Upon the completion of these forms, a summary form is completed by the teacher(s). This form assesses the results of all assessments as well as the student's abilities and interests as evidenced by grades, test scores, and various informal measures that have been collected.

The standard transition worksheet used by the Hamilton County Department of Education contains sections specified for academic/vocational instruction and related services, community experiences, adult living and employment skills, daily living skills and functional academic skills, and other topics that the planning team deems necessary for the student in question. The team must specify whether or not the student should receive services in the indicated area and, if not, give justification to prove that services are unnecessary. If the services are deemed necessary, the team must indicate what type of service is needed in each area. The team is required to write a transition goal for each area in which a need for services is indicated.

In order for the planning team to function efficiently, a variety of members must be present. Typically, the special education teacher serves as a guide for the rest of the team throughout the process. If the student is enrolled in general education classes, the general education teacher should be present. The teachers work to supply information about the student's strengths and weaknesses in academic areas, behaviors, and expressed interests. A school administrator should attend the meeting. The school psychologist should attend in order to interpret evaluations for other members of the team. The school guidance counselor can supply valuable

information about the options that are available to the student. In applicable cases, related professionals such as doctors, nurses, physical/occupational therapists, and speech pathologists should be present in order to discuss specific physical limitations that the student may have. When a vocational training program is in question, the vocational program teacher should be present. In ideal situations, a vocational rehabilitation counselor should be present. The student's parent must be present in order for planning to take place, and any decision made must be approved by the parent before implementation. A recent and very positive trend has been that of including the student in the planning process (LD OnLine, 2000).

As with any other part of the student's IEP, the ITP should be reviewed and, if necessary, adapted on an annual basis. This is important because the student's needs are constantly changing. The team should consider the fact that, while it may seem time consuming, statement of specific goals and objectives and the methods that will be employed in order to reach them is the easiest way to move a student to the next level. A study by Beattie, Grigal, Test, and Wood (1997) found that in one high school, while the goals and objectives in the majority of transition plans complied with IDEA mandates, they tended to be vague and failed to address long-term planning and annual revision of the plan. Failure to

give detailed descriptions of the desired results of the transition planning is ultimately damaging to the transition process.

Another common detriment to the planning process is that, while ideally a variety of people should be involved, often the only individuals in attendance of the IEP meeting are the special educator, the general educator, the school psychologist, and the parent. A study by Defur, Getzel, and Kregel (1994) found that out of 100 students surveyed in fourteen school systems in Virginia, less than half of these students attended their own meetings. Failure of the students and other key team members to attend the IEP meeting often results in a narrowed perspective. While the teachers, psychologists, and parents know a good deal about the student's needs, they may be uninformed about the services that are available or certain special needs that may need to be addressed.

Section VI

Models of Transition

The transition process is a multistep process that can be approached from several different angles. Ideally, this is a process that involves several people, each of whom holds a different perspective on the subject and plays a different role in the process. There are several ways to introduce vocational education into the curriculum. Additionally, there are many practices that can enhance the transition process.

Deshler, Ellis, and Lenz (1996) identified four models school-to-work models of transition:

1. The Curriculum Content Model, which emphasizes teaching of knowledge and skills necessary for employment. Such skills include work-related social skills, functional academic skills, occupational skills, and employability skills. Emphasis is largely on learning generalizable skills and working toward competency in each identified area.
2. The Support Services Model is defined by Feichtner (1989) as including “planned activities designed to help meet specific academic, social-emotional, training, and

daily living needs of the individual when the person requires assistance.” This approach focuses on the severity of disability and addresses the level of support that each student with special needs may need in the time during and after the transition. All applications of the support services model recognize that some students need no special services, some need support services for a limited period of time, and some need continuous services.

3. The Instructional Stages Model approaches transition in several stages, assuming that transition is a progression through these stages. The stages of career development are:
 1. Career awareness from kindergarten to sixth grade.
 2. Career exploration.
 3. Career preparation.
 4. Career placement or implementation.

Each stage entails varying levels of support. The instructional stages model is advantageous because it emphasizes early exploration of the occupational realm.

4. The Futures-Oriented Curriculum Model includes the identification of goals and objectives in order to enable the student to succeed in his or her current environment as well as environments in which the student may later be placed. There is an emphasis on assessment of the student's strengths and weaknesses and the establishment of a record-keeping system that keeps track of mastery of the identified objectives.

Weaknesses are addressed and prosthetics provided in order to decrease dependence on specific skills.

There are a variety of settings available to teach vocational and academic skills. A student may attend a vocational center part of the day and receive academic instruction in another high school during the rest of the day. The vocational training center may be within the high school. A third option is the a sort of supported employment in which students are contracted through their high school to work in job settings outside of the

school. Ideally, the vocational training experience is integrated with education in academic skills. This academic education may take place either in a general education classroom or a special education classroom. It is important, as with all situations involving students with special needs, to place the student in the least restrictive environment for his or her disability.

Section VII

Best Practices in Transition

While there are many basic practices that should be applied to the transition of all students with special needs, there are a great deal of practices that can be used for specific students in order to provide an enriching experience that goes beyond simply teaching occupational skills. The IEP team should evaluate each student on an individual basis and determine which services and practices can be beneficial for the student.

As the practice of including the student in the planning of his or her own IEP becomes a more common practice, so does the occurrence of a practice known as person-centered transition planning. According to Bates and Miner (1997), person-centered planning refers to “approaches for empowering students and their families to assume a more assertive role in their own program planning.”

Person-centered planning, as the name implies, is the practice of involving the student fully in the planning of his or her own transition. This type of planning considers the interests and goals of the student to be the most important influence on the direction that the process takes. Kaiser and Abell (1997) assert that, when a student is not involved in the

planning process, they are more likely to lack motivation to reach the goals that the teacher has for them. Often, when an older student is not allowed any voice in his or her own education or the planning of his or her future, the student may feel bitter or even angry. It is important for teen-age students to feel some control over their situation.

Person-centered planning is a rather involved process. It is suggested that a planning meeting be held several months before the IEP planning or review session (McKenna, 1998). This allows all members of the team to consider the student's interests, wishes, needs, goals, and abilities when considering and planning his or her part of the IEP. In order to hold the student's opinion in perspective, it is helpful to provide questionnaires and forms to be completed by the student and the family. Bates and Miner (1997) suggest the use of a "circle of support" map and a "community presence" map. The circle of support map lists all people who provide support to the student and their level of closeness to the student. The community presence map lists all of the community settings that the student uses on a daily, weekly, monthly, or occasional basis. It is helpful to provide lists of the student's preferences, likes, dislikes, and particular strengths and abilities. When team members are given a clear

picture of what they are working toward, this simplifies the job a great deal.

Advocacy is an issue that is closely related to person-centered planning. Advocacy can very much determine the effectiveness of the transition process. Some students with especially strong social skills may become self-advocates. Other students and their families may find that it is more effective to enlist the help of someone else for advocacy issues. In any case, advocacy can help the student and the planning team determine what the most important needs are and how the goals should be prioritized. Also, the advocate can assist in obtaining services or educating others about disabilities. It is recommended that, if the student is unable to advocate for him/herself, the person chosen as advocate not be a member of the school staff but rather someone who will be available to the student after graduation. This person can be a family member, friend, or even a member of the clergy (McKenna, 1998).

Family involvement is a key to successful planning. The student's family members are often able to provide information that the student is unable to provide about himself. In addition, the level of help that the family lends in the actual teaching process makes a difference. Heal and Rusch (1995) found that students with a greater level of family

involvement were much more likely to stay in school and to gain successful employment than those whose families were unsupportive, indifferent, or not present in the student's daily life. This is not a surprising fact, as it is difficult to maintain progress when the student is experiencing troubles at home or is not receiving encouragement.

McKenna (1998) emphasizes the importance of compiling a resume during the transition process. When a student graduates from a secondary school setting to a postsecondary work setting, he or she is considered not for the educational credits that have been accumulated but rather for the skills and work experiences that have been acquired. De la Garza, Harmon, and Patton (1997) stress the importance of teaching students how to obtain proper documentation in order to become employed as well as how to prepare a resume. It is wise to work on the resume throughout the vocational training experience. Students can keep documentation regarding projects and assignments that they have been involved in and periodically can be assisted by the teacher and other staff members in organizing this information into a resume format. The finished product, completed soon before graduation, should work to "market" the student and sell the special skills that have been developed through the employment and training experiences.

It is important to provide a variety of skills in the vocational training. Kregel, Wehman, and West (1999) stress the importance of not limiting students with special needs in job choices. A common misconception is that exceptional students, especially those with moderate to severe mental retardation or physical disabilities, have a limited range of abilities. The jobs that are available to this population are largely basic jobs dealing with custodial work, food services, and other minimum wage types of jobs. This, however, is at least partially due to employer and community biases and stereotypes.

It is important for those involved in the transition process to provide training for students in all aspects of business. Students can learn computer skills, accounting skills, customer services skills, child care skills, etc. Limiting the types of jobs that students learn how to perform during their vocational training is very damaging. Students with disabilities are usually quite capable of performing tasks that are beyond simple; it may take more training than with a student without a disability, but in the long run the extra time and training is worth it.

In addition, students should be encouraged not to limit themselves to accepting jobs with low wages and few benefits. Students with special needs are just as eligible as others for jobs with competitive wages,

insurance benefits, and flexible hours. They should be encouraged to seek such jobs rather than being encouraged to accept the first job that is offered to them, whether it matches their skills or not (Kregel et al., 1999). These issues can easily be addressed as advocacy issues.

Probably the most important issue in vocational training is that of teaching functional skills. This issue, in fact, is quite possibly more important than the teaching of the actual job skills. Many of the remedial academic skills that are taught in the classroom lack relevance to the futures of the students with special needs (Abell & Kaiser, 1997). Students need to learn functional skills that will be used on a regular, even daily, basis. Functional skills are not limited to functional academics (money counting, reading labels, etc.). Functional skills include social skills, community functioning skills, and daily living skills.

Daily living skills such as grocery shopping, choosing clothes, choosing and preparing meals and snacks, and taking care of general health and hygiene issues are important if the student is to achieve any level of independence. While the family may be concerned for the student's welfare, independence is a goal that should be aimed for. When there is some feeling of independence, this lends to a feeling of empowerment to the individual.

When considering issues related to employment, those involved in a student's transition must consider the social skills that the student exhibits in a job setting. While productivity and quality of work are certainly very important, the ability of a worker to get along with other employees and effectively take instruction are even more important. Black and Rojewski (1998) identified the three most important components of social awareness as sensitivity, insight, and communication. Their studies found that when an employee was found to possess these qualities, the employer was much more likely to look upon this employee favorably. Similarly, de la Garza et al. (1997) suggest that students receive training in "being a good employee" and "getting along with others on the job." These social skills often lead to better working conditions; when people are happier, they tend to work harder.

Another beneficial practice in transition is that of beginning transition at an early age. It may be a great shock when the mandatory provision of educational services ends at the age of twenty-one (Fee, 1999). Therefore, the family, teachers, and other support staff may wish to begin teaching helpful skills at an early age. Morse and Schuster (2000) conducted a study in which they taught elementary students with intellectual disabilities how to shop for groceries. When taught in the right

manner, such lessons are extremely entertaining for children while providing invaluable education in the skills of life. Young students can learn any number of living skills and even some basic vocational skills.

The planning team should also consider what will happen once a student has graduated from the system or turned twenty-one. Fee (1999) suggests having a “life plan” in place to deal with this situation. In any case, a referral to an adult agency is advisable. This referral should take place before graduation, allowing the student and family to become familiar with the options that are available. In addition, an adult agency may provide services that are not available to the school system. Some adult agencies even provide allowances for necessary expenses, such as clothing, medical examinations, and transportation. A job coach may also be made available in order to provide on the job support for employees (de la Garza et al., 1997).

It is also suggested that, even early in the transition process, interactions between support agencies may be very beneficial. Human services agencies, vocational rehabilitation agencies, vocational training facilities, school systems, and others can work together to provide a rich learning experience for the student with special needs. Several agencies can offer a multifaceted learning experience, whereas the options that the

school system alone can offer (or is willing to offer) can be very limited (Destefano et al., 1997).

As stated before, independence is a very important issue for students in transition. A very effective method of fostering independence is to encourage students to participate in job clubs. Job clubs allow students to share their career and life goals with one another in a casual, unthreatening environment. In a job club, students can set short-term goals and hold one another accountable for meeting them without feeling immense pressure, as one might feel if a teacher or other adult was holding them accountable. When a student receives encouragement and praise from another student, this provides a wonderful self-esteem boost (Benz et al., 1996).

Another way to help the student toward independence is to allow the student to evaluate the work that he or she completes in an employment setting. The employee may time the progression of a task or may keep a tally of efficiency (i.e. how many dishes were washed, how many pens were assembled). This is an ongoing process, allowing the employee and employer to track progress and perhaps find problems that may be hindering peak performance. Grossi and Heward (1998) found

that this practice not only gave the employee a greater sense of pride in the work done, but also improved performance a great deal.

Success in transition is dependent on the blending of many factors. It is important that the planning team take into consideration each aspect of transition and plan carefully according to the individual in question. The most important thing to remember is that an ITP and its implementation should not be “cookie cutter” plans. What works for one student may be ineffective with the next. As with any matter in special education, flexibility is the most important tactic to apply when teaching. Those providing support to the student must be able to adapt at a moment’s notice and lend help, not criticism, when a problem arises. A perfectly mapped transition plan is useless when it is not accompanied by support, understanding, and encouragement.

Section VIII

Case Study: Pyramid Industries

While Chattanooga lacks a community-based vocational rehabilitation program, a few such programs exist within the Hamilton County school system. One prominent program is Pyramid Industries, housed at Brainerd High School, which is an inner-city high school in Chattanooga with a population of mostly minority students.

Pyramid Industries began with a grant written in 1987 by Michael McIntyre and funded by local private bonds. Mr. McIntyre wrote this grant to begin a vocational/transitional program specifically for students with moderate to severe physical disabilities and mental retardation. Mr. McIntyre envisioned a business within a school that would allow students to learn vital skills through hands-on training that would take place within the typical school day, on school property.

Pyramid Industries offers services for students ranging from grades nine through twelve and from 14 to 22 years of age. These students are largely from families of a low socioeconomic status. The racial division within Pyramid Industries has been roughly 50/50. These students

typically function at a low level in mathematics, reading, English, and other academic subjects, often at third grade level or below.

Students who are enrolled in Pyramid Industries attend other classes during the school day. Outside of Pyramid, they receive instruction in academic areas in both general and special education classrooms. Generally, a student will spend two or three class periods a day working and receiving instruction in the Pyramid facility. Each year, approximately sixty-five students work in Pyramid Industries.

The goals of Pyramid Industries are varied, but fall into two main categories: life/community skills and business/work skills. The transition specialists and teachers at Pyramid aim to teach students how to perform important daily tasks efficiently. These tasks include money handling, interpersonal skills, and decision-making. These skills are taught through direct instruction, role-playing, discussion, and simply through interactions with one another and the instructors.

The business aspect of Pyramid is even more involved than the community skills aspect. There are many skills to learn during employment at Pyramid. Students learn about supply and demand, including the higher demand for many goods that occurs seasonally, and how to produce efficiently according to supply and demand. They take

part in the manufacturing, packaging, and shipping of the goods that are produced at Pyramid. Skills intended to enhance the student's overall work force experience, such as interpersonal skills and machine/tool competencies, are taught. Finally, students gain valuable business knowledge such as bookkeeping, computer, and business/personal math skills. Most of these skills are taught in real-life work situations occurring right there, within the confines of the school.

The tasks that Pyramid students undertake are varied. Pyramid subcontracts work from various businesses. These businesses turn in specific orders, which the students of Pyramid Industries work to fill. There is a great deal of opportunity for the students to learn and practice different work skills. These students have undertaken such projects as building miniature Rock City birdhouses, assembling medical kits, and producing toys, to name just a few.

After graduating from Brainerd High School, students are assisted by the staff of Pyramid in finding competitive jobs in the community. These jobs are typically full-time jobs with benefits. The Pyramid staff keeps the lines of communication open with former participants in an attempt to help students continuously find employment as needed and to

provide other services that the individuals may need in their postsecondary experience.

During the course of my research, I spent a considerable amount of time at Brainerd High School, observing day-to-day activities and conversing with the students in Pyramid Industries. Pyramid is housed in a large, warehouse-type room within the school building. There is a work area where students carry out their assigned tasks. In another section of the room, desks and a blackboard accommodate students and staff for academic instruction. A storage area and loading dock occupy yet another area of the facility. Finally, there is an office area where paperwork is kept and business is conducted.

The relationship between the students and the staff is friendly and easygoing. The students appear very comfortable around their teachers and assistants. Staff members are extremely personable and tactful in their interactions with the students. Often, I observed more of a discussion-type discourse than a lecture discourse.

Probably the most notable positive that can be observed at Pyramid Industries is the work ethic of the students. The work skills and speed that are exhibited are excellent. I observed that once a student had begun his or her assigned task, it was nearly impossible for me to carry on a

conversation with that student. Generally, they are so absorbed in their work that they cannot be bothered with unimportant small talk. The students that I observed worked quickly and with great precision, producing large amounts of quality output.

I was equally impressed with the social skills of the students with whom I spoke to. Every student was sociable. They easily carried on conversations with one another and with me. Every time that I went to Pyramid, students would greet me in a friendly manner and ask me how I was doing, what I was going to do there, etc. Once I had settled in and begun my observations, some would approach me to talk. Others were not as bold, but every time I asked a question of a student, I was given a prompt and friendly answer. On a few occasions, I actually carried on rather lengthy and interesting conversations with various students.

In order to further research the effectiveness of the practices used at Pyramid Industries, I conducted interviews with four graduates of the program as well as a supervisor of each. The four alumni were Jeff and J.J., who work at Winn-Dixie as baggers, Connie, who works at Orange Grove Center in nutrition services, and Nathan, who serves as a customer service clerk at another Winn-Dixie. These graduates had been out of high school from two to ten years.

I prepared two sets of questions, one for graduates of Brainerd High School and one for their supervisors. As I asked the questions, I made modifications based on the needs of the interviewee. Often, I found that I needed to ask more specific questions in order to help them understand the original question.

Jeff and J.J., both of whom graduated from Brainerd High in 1999, told me that they had been employed at Winn-Dixie for approximately one year; they had been placed at this employment setting with the help of the staff at Pyramid Industries. Both men told me that they enjoyed their jobs at Winn-Dixie and were unable to decide what aspect of their jobs that they liked best. J.J., however, expressed an interest in bussing tables at a restaurant in the future. Both men were very friendly and answered my questions easily.

Jeff and J.J. both told me that they enjoyed the time that they spent in Pyramid Industries. Their answers to my questions about Pyramid were not very specific. They told me that they liked the staff and their fellow students. Both men lit up when I mentioned Mr. McIntyre.

Michelle, the head cashier at Winn-Dixie, told me that Jeff and J.J. are both excellent workers. She was unfamiliar with the program at Pyramid Industries, but did tell me that they use counting skills in their

jobs. Specifically, she told me that they are both very precise and that if one of them is told to do something, then it will be done exactly right.

Connie is a 1990 graduate of Brainerd High School. She has worked at Orange Grove Center for approximately two years. In her job at Orange Grove, her main task is dishwashing. Connie was very quiet and responded to most of my questions with “I don’t know.” However, she did tell me that she enjoys her job. She also told me that her parents helped her find her job at Orange Grove. Connie told me that she did not remember much about her time at Pyramid Industries.

Connie’s immediate supervisor at Orange Grove is a lady named Benilda. Benilda told me that Connie is very quiet and interacts very little with other employees. However, she gets along very well with others. Like Michelle, Benilda was unfamiliar with Pyramid Industries. She told me that Connie is a very efficient worker and that her skills in her job are “perfect.” In her job, Connie does not use any functional academic skills.

The final interview that I conducted was with Nathan, a 1995 graduate of Brainerd High. He told me that he had been employed at Winn-Dixie for five years and that the Pyramid staff helped him find his job. Nathan told me that he likes his job; I watched him for a few minutes and he was very friendly and helpful with the customers, bagging and

carrying out groceries for them. Nathan told me that when he is at home he enjoys watching television and that he has to help his mother clean the house. He told me that he liked being involved in Pyramid Industries and when I asked him about the staff he named off several members and told me that he really liked them. Nathan was very friendly and talkative.

Cliff, assistant location manager at this Winn-Dixie, said that Nathan's work ability is "great." When asked about Nathan's strengths and weaknesses, he told me that he would have to focus on Nathan's strengths because Nathan doesn't really have any weaknesses in his job. He told me that Nathan always has a great attitude and does everything exactly right. Cliff was unfamiliar with Pyramid Industries but told me that Nathan uses some functional academic skills, such as reading and counting.

Overall, I found that these graduates were satisfied with their job placements. Likewise, their employers were very satisfied with the quality of work that they were receiving from the Pyramid graduates. This high level of satisfaction and apparent work ethic was displayed in all situations, which suggests that Pyramid contributed to this high standard to which its graduates adhere.

While the interviewing process proved to be somewhat informative, the topic could be more thoroughly explored by soliciting input from the parents of the graduates. This could be done well through a mail-out survey. However, because of low reliability and financial constraints, I did not conduct such a survey.

The program used at Pyramid Industries appears to be producing optimal results. The skills taught on a daily basis at Pyramid are the types of skills necessary for a vocational training program to be successful. Overall, the employers of Pyramid alumni seem very satisfied. According to Mr. McIntyre, approximately 93% of Pyramid alumni have found successful employment. The staff and students at Pyramid Industries are meeting their standards with a high level of efficiency.

Graduates of Pyramid would likely benefit from working in the technological field. A great deal of articles written regarding transition emphasize the need to place individuals with disabilities in jobs that would allow them to work with computers or other types of technology; this is a population that is greatly underrepresented in the technological field.

Further, Chattanooga would benefit from an adult agency designed specifically to provide support for individuals with special needs who are no longer involved in local school programs. Because their focus is on

students still in school and supported employment, the staff at Brainerd High School, Orange Grove Center, and other facilities providing services for students with special needs are unable to provide continuing services for those who have gone on to competitive employment. An agency that would provide services to these individuals if needed would be beneficial. Collaboration with programs that are sending graduates into competitive employment would allow such an agency to provide individuals in transition a wide variety of employment options and a good deal more support.

Pyramid Industries and similar programs are providing much-needed services to students making the transition from high school to postsecondary employment. Students who have the opportunity to participate in a vocational training program are at a great advantage in the competitive job market. Programs like these, along with continuing education programs and adult agencies, are promoting and increasing the employment success of those that many in the community may have, in the past, considered “unemployable.”

DHON Interview Questions for Pyramid Graduates

1. *Name of interviewee*
2. *Job status of interviewee*
3. *Place of employment*
4. *Length of time at this job placement*
5. *Job description*
6. *Year graduated from Brainerd High School/Pyramid Industries*
7. *How soon after your graduation from Pyramid did you find employment?*
8. *Did you find this job on your own, or were you given assistance from the Pyramid staff or other community organizations?*
9. *In this job placement, what skills do you use that you learned at Pyramid?*
10. *How do you feel that your training at Pyramid prepared you for social interactions with other employees?*
11. *What is your living situation (assisted living or independent)?*
12. *What are some living skills that your time at Pyramid taught you?*

13. *Do you consider your time at Pyramid to be a positive thing? What are some of your feelings about being involved in the program?*

14. *Do you feel that the staff at Pyramid Industries is well-trained to help students learn skills for jobs and independent living?*

15. *What are some of your goals for the next five years (career, family, recreational, personal)?*

16. *On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the vocational training offered by Pyramid Industries/Brainerd High School?*

DHON Employer Interview

1. *Name of interviewee*
2. *Position of interviewee*
3. *Name of employee*
4. *How long has this employee worked for you?*
5. *How would you rate this employee's job skills?*
6. *How do you think that Pyramid prepared this employee for competitive employment?*
7. *What are some skills that this employee uses in this job that were learned at Pyramid Industries?*
8. *If you are familiar with the employee's living situation, how do you feel that the living skills that he/she learned at Pyramid Industries are being put to use from day to day?*
9. *Are you familiar with this employee's functional academic skills? If so, how do you feel that Pyramid prepared this employee for activities such as everyday math, counting, etc.?*

Section IX

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Section X

Appendices