Q & A with Professor Mike Bullis

Mike Bullis, from the University of Oregon in the United States, is a world-renowned expert on secondary education for children with special needs. He talks about how curriculum needs to be structured to ensure young people with disabilities have maximum opportunity for employment in the future.

Why do students with disabilities need a special program in the last years of schooling?

Adolescents with disabilities experience difficulties after leaving school and when trying to enter adult roles in the community. Transition experiences are especially poor for ‘high incidence’ disability categories such as specific learning disabilities and young people with emotional or behavioural disabilities (EBD). Given the generally poor post-school outcomes for adolescents with disabilities, and the US federal legislation that calls for the purpose of public education to be to prepare students with disabilities to enter society as successful citizens, the high school years are likely to be the last opportunity for a concerted effort to prepare these young people for adult roles in society. There is absolutely no question that such an emphasis is critical to the ultimate wellbeing of the young people we have pledged to teach and serve.

What evidence is there to back up your view?

According to research conducted over 20 years in the United States, including numerous surveys, most adolescents with disabilities experience significant challenges after leaving the school system. Many have problems accessing social services, enrolling in and completing post-secondary education, and entering a meaningful and well-paid career path. In recent years there has been an increase in adolescents with disabilities enrolling in post-secondary education, but that percentage is still far lower than those without disabilities.

National and state-level studies in the US show that around 40 per cent of adolescents with EBD drop out of school. In the first few years after school, less than a quarter receive services from community-based social service agencies, only 15 per cent enrol in post-secondary education, and just more than half secure a competitive job. Data for adolescents with specific learning disabilities are generally a bit better, but still low compared to peers without disabilities.
What is an ideal curriculum structure for these students at this stage of their schooling?

I believe that the best curriculum for adolescents with disabilities in high school is one with a focus on the community setting and each student’s transition from school and into adult roles. By this I mean that for roughly 10–15 hours per school week, students should have numerous and regular opportunities to explore different career options by shadowing workers in careers of potential interest, visiting possible post-secondary programs, and/or having opportunities for both paid and unpaid work experiences.

There is a correlation between young people having successful work experiences while in school and working successfully after leaving. It is critical that these placements are developed carefully and supported by educators who will work in both community and school settings. Academic classes should be based on the demands of the work or educational setting in which the student either is, or most likely, to be placed. This ‘contextual education’ ties work or career requirements to the curriculum (e.g. the maths taught is necessary for the student to succeed in a particular job).

What is the best way to provide this program?

The primary socialisation context for all students – including adolescents with disabilities and those with EBD – is the school system. Something that amazed me during the years I directed projects that provided transition services to adolescents with EBD was that the young people who dropped out of school often spent more time around school than when they were enrolled. That attraction to be around peers in the school setting is something we should use to encourage those young people to remain in school and to be included in meaningful school experiences that combine employment and academic work.

There are two great challenges in providing this type of instruction. First, to have real work experiences students must be allowed and encouraged to leave school and engage in work in the community. Second, educational staff also must be free to leave the school setting to place students in competitive employment; offer support to employers, students, and their families; coordinate social services from community agencies, and then work with teachers to offer tailored instruction relative to each student’s needs and goals for after leaving high school.

What training is required for teachers and education support staff?

For educators to be effective and efficient in the high school/transition model they must have several unique skill sets that are not included in traditional educator training programs. Specifically, they need a working knowledge of the competitive employment system; how to approach employers to establish work placements for their students; knowledge of the community-based social system; how to access those services for the students with whom they work; and skill in helping students plan their transition from school into adult roles. The academic skills educators need would then relate to the future-oriented focus of the students’ career and life goals and how to integrate job and career requirements into academic instruction.

How can partnerships contribute to pathways for young people?

A central assumption of the high school/transition model is that by including family members, employers and agencies in a student’s school-based program, those supports and avenues will be solidified. In other words, the social service supports that the students will need later should be established before they leave school. Students will also be able to access post-secondary education and/or employment that they select as a result of the carefully planned and informed experiences they had while in secondary school. In the projects I directed for adolescents with EBD, we found that the students were frequently hired by employers with whom they were placed as students, or entered post-secondary programs that they explored while in our programs.

This interview was conducted by the Research Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.


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