# Career Education and Transition Programming: Starting at the Beginning

Betty Clark Carlson

**Abstract**

This article proposes a reexamination of the time frame for delivery of career education and transition programming for elementary students with disabilities. Career education is defined, two models of career education are discussed and career education at the elementary level is discussed.

**Career Education and Transition Programming: Starting at the Beginning**

Changes in special education practices and policies within the last ten years reflect increased parental and professional attention to the outcomes of educational efforts on behalf of students with disabilities. Post-school outcomes for these students have undergone national scrutiny in the form of questions such as: (a) Where do these students go after leaving school? (b) What are they doing with their time? (c) Where are they living? and (d) What is the quality of their lives?

Traditionally, transition and career education activities have been introduced into the curriculum at the secondary school level when students' departure from the school environment is imminent. Secondary school curricula is primarily content- or substance-based. However, successful transition to the adult world depends on the acquisition and demonstration of process behaviors (e.g., appropriate self-management; problem-solving and decision-making skills; the ability to understand and respond appropriately to social cues; the ability to self-regulate one's behavior individually and in group contexts). To begin to address these process behaviors at the secondary level is to court failure; the premise of this paper is that career education and transition programming must begin at the elementary school level.

**What is Career Education?**

Although formally introduced more than 15 years ago, career education has no single, universally accepted definition. Initial conceptualizations of career education were derived primarily from vocational education (Bailey, 1985; Hoyt, 1976) and subsequent definitions focused almost exclusively on work. Other professionals rejected this rather narrow view of career education and instead maintained that while the work component of career education is important, it is no more important than the areas of personal, social, and daily life skills for the individual learner (Kokaska & Brolin, 1985). The proposal to begin career education at the elementary level is based on this conception of career education. Career education is viewed as the process of systematically coordinating all school, family, and community components together to facilitate each individual's potential for economic, social and personal fulfillment and participation in productive work activities. Occupations are only one facet of the total career development of the learner; social and personal development become an integral part of the career development process.

In addition to being broad and comprehensive, this definition suggests the importance of transition programming; the mechanism by which the individual's life development goals and activities are infused into the ongoing curriculum (Ianacone & Stodden, 1987). Inherent in the transition process are the following key values that reflect current thinking about educational service delivery for persons with disabilities: personal empowerment, outcome-focused program planning and the promotion of skills and behaviors that facilitate maximum integration and community adjustment (Bradley & Bersani, 1990).

**Models of Career Education**

Recent evidence shows that elementary, as well as middle school teachers seldom provide students with opportunities to take part in career exploration and career education activities (Moore, Agran, & McSweyn, 1990). Lack of career education in elementary classrooms may be due to such factors as the perception of career education as an "add-on" to the basic curriculum, difficulty in locating materials, heavy teacher workloads and limited funding for materials and supplies. In addition, teachers may lack the knowledge and support to design and implement career education within their classrooms (Ellington & Winkoff, 1982).

Given the discouraging results of follow-up and follow-along studies of special education school leavers (Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985), changes must be made in how and when transition programming and career education are introduced into school curriculums. Brolin (1978) and Clark (1979) have each proposed models of career education that are particularly relevant for elementary students. Each of these models is briefly discussed.

**Brolin's Life Centered Career Education Model**

Brolin (1978) views career education as an "educational reform movement," describing his curriculum as a total program approach, rather than just part of an educational program. His curriculum consists of 22 student competencies, organized into

three major categories: (a) daily living skills; (b) occupational guidance and preparation and (c) personal and social skills. The model contains a kindergarten-to-adult services scope and sequence, and uses academic skill acquisition as the basis for development within each of the three categories. Basic propositions of the model underscore the importance of starting career education early in the educational process; these propositions include the following:

1. The development of a "work personality" (i.e., an individual's own unique set of abilities and needs) begins shortly after birth and matures sufficiently only if provided with early and adequate reinforcers in one's environment.

2. Career and self-awareness activities form the foundation for the three subsequent career development stages, and therefore, should begin almost immediately in elementary school curricula (Brolin & Schatzman, 1989).

### Clark's Model for Students with Disabilities

Clark (1979) developed a sequential model for educators working with special education students beginning at the kindergarten level and extending through adulthood. Similar to Brolin (1978), Clark (1979) maintains that career education for persons with disabilities should reflect the broader perspective of all potential life roles, rather than awareness, exploration and preparation solely for the role of worker or producer. While Clark's model of career education within public school settings focuses on work careers, it also emphasizes other skills deemed important to life-role careers, such as (a) attitudes, values and habits; (b) human relationships; (c) occupational information and (d) acquisition of job and daily living skills. Clark recommends that educational objectives in elementary school (K - 6) reflect an emphasis on occupational roles, occupational vocabulary, awareness of occupational choices and alternatives and a general understanding and awareness of the realities of the world of work.

### Career Education at the Elementary Level: Developing Awareness

Career development begins with a two-fold process of awareness that includes developing self-awareness, as well as gaining a realization of the nature and meaning of work (Jordaan & Heyde, 1979). In the elementary school grades, these tasks can be accomplished by (a) giving students opportunities to develop independent school/work habits; (b) encouraging their participation in a wide range of activities for learning about their individual preferences, strengths and weaknesses; (c) facilitating their implementation of, and responsibility for, classroom duties and (d) delivering positive consequences for those efforts that foster the development of positive self-regard. Unsuccessful accomplishment of these fundamental tasks can result in a lack of readiness to cope with career exploration in early adolescence.

### Survival Skill Training

Many students enrolled in special education programs have problems with social skills that their peers in regular education learn implicitly. Garnett (1984) notes that school survival skills (e.g., punctuality, taking turns, following directions, functioning as part of a group, dealing with frustration) need to be taught explicitly through direct instruction, with attention paid to the students' awareness of the instruction. Often, teachers assume that these students will learn these skills "on their own," through exposure to peers or classroom expectations. Garnett's (1984) "Get-It-Together" curriculum provides a means of systematically instructing students with disabilities to learn, practice and become aware of skills and work habits that promote school and ultimately life adjustment and success.

Other researchers concur with the importance of early task accomplishment. Successful transition to subsequent school environments, whether to the next grade level or to a mainstream setting, is often linked to students' demonstration of particular entry-level or "survival" skills. These "survival" skills include specific social- and task-related performance outcomes deemed important for participation in the next environment (Jaquish & Stella, 1986; McCormick & Kawate, 1982; Smith, 1986). In addition to facilitating successful transitions to subsequent educational settings, the attainment and on-going production of "getting it together" or "survival" skills may have a powerful influence on students' self-esteem and self-concept, that in turn, can impact significantly on current academic achievement (Kershner, 1990; Stipek & Weisz, 1981).

### Employment Adaptability Skill Training

Mithaug, Martin and Agran (1987) present a parallel approach to Garnett's (1984) academic work habits curriculum. Their approach is designed to teach students generic employment adaptability skills, such as decision-making, independent performance, self-evaluation and adjustment. According to Karan and Knight (1986) and Chamberlain (1988), workers who are unable to demonstrate these "adaptability" skills may find their continued employment in jeopardy.

The employability skills identified above are remarkably similar to those outlined in Garnett's (1984) "Get-It-Together" curriculum and the adaptability curriculum proposed by Mithaug and colleagues (Mithaug et al., 1987). In both cases, emphasis is placed on teaching these skills directly early in the student's school career. Waiting until junior or senior high school to begin instruction in these fundamental career education concepts significantly delays the developmental process and potential for success in employment and other areas of adult living. The skills, knowledge and processes individuals need to be successful in the world at large should be instilled early in the child's development and introduced systematically at the elementary level. Students acquiring these process

behaviors early can then direct their energy and attention toward the content or substance of tasks, whether they be academic, occupational or social. The elementary school is the level where the critical foundations of career development and successful transition to adult life are laid (Clark, Carlson, Fisher, Cook, & D'Alonzo, in press).

## Conclusion

There is a growing realization in the field of career education that it is neither realistic nor appropriate to expect positive career development and transition outcomes if programming for students does not occur until they reach the high school setting. A lack of focus on transition and career development skills and processes prior to the secondary level is counterproductive; students are denied access to the very skills, processes and opportunities that have direct impact on their future success in subsequent school and life settings. The immediate and future needs of children with disabilities require that they be provided with career education and transition programming, beginning with their entrance into elementary school.

## References


Bradley, V. J., & Bersani, H. A. *Quality Assurance for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities: It's Everybody's Business*. Baltimore: Paul H.Brookes,1990.

Bailey, L. J. *Career education for teachers and counselors: A practical approach*. Cranston, RI: Carroll Press, 1985.

Brolin, D. E. *Life-centered career education: A competency base approach*. Reston, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1978.

Brolin, D. E., & Schatzman, B. "Lifelong career development," in D. Berkell & Brown eds., *Transition from School to Work for Persons with Disabilities*,22-41. White Plains, NY: Longman, 1989.

Chamberlain, M. A. "Employers' rankings of factors judged critical to job success for individuals with severe disabilities," in *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 11, 141-147, 1988.

Clark, G. M. *Career Education for the Handicapped Child in the Elementary Classroom*. Denver: Love, 1979.

Clark, G. M., Carlson, B. C., Fisher, S., Cook, I. D., & D'Alonzo, B. "Career development for students with disabilities in elementary schools: A position paper of the division on career development," in *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, in press*.

Ellington, C., & Winkoff, L. "Low cost implementation of a career education program for elementary school children with handicaps," in *Journal of Career Education*, 8, 246-255, 1982.

Garnett, K. "Some of the problems children encounter in learning a school's hidden curriculum," in *Journal of Reading, Writing, and Learning Disabilities*, 1, 5-10, 1984.

Hasazi, S. B., Gordon, L. B., & Roe, C. A. "Factors associated with the employment status of handicapped children exiting high school from 1979 to 1983," in *Exceptional Children*, 51, 455-469, 1985.

Hoyt, K. B. *Relationships between career education and vocational education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976.

Ianacone, R. N., & Stodden, R. A. eds. *Transition issues and directions*. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children, 1987.

Jaquish, C., & Stella, M. "Helping special needs students move from elementary to secondary school," in *Counterpoint*, 7, 1, 1986.

Jordaan, J. P., & Heyde, M. B. *Vocational Maturity During the High School Years*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1979.

Karan, O., & Knight, C. B. "Developing support networks for individuals who fail to achieve competitive employment," in F. Rusch ed., *Competitive Employment:Issues and Strategies*, 241-255. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 1986.

Kershner, J. R. "Self-concept and IQ as predictors of remedial success in children with learning disabilities," in *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 23, 368-374, 1990.

Kokaska, C. J., & Brolin, D. E. *Career Education for Handicapped Individuals* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1985.

McCormick, L., & Kawate, J. "Kindergarten survival skills: New directions for preschool special education," in *Education and Training of the Mentally Retarded*, 17, 247-252, 1982.

Mithaug, D. E., Horiuchi, C. N., & Fanning, P. N. "A report on the Colorado statewide follow-up survey of special education students," in *Exceptional Children*, 51, 397-404, 1985.

Mithaug, D. E., Martin, J., & Agran, M. "Adaptability instruction: The goal of transition programming," in *Exceptional Children*, 53, 500-505, 1987.

Moore, S. C., Agran, M., & McSweyn, C. A. "Career education: Are we starting early enough?" in *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 13, 129-134, 1990.

Smith, C. L. "Classroom survival skills: Requisites to mainstreaming," *unpublished master's thesis*, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1986.

Stipek, D., & Weisz, J. R. "Perceived personal control and academic achievement," in *Review of Educational Research*, 51, 101-137, 1981.


---

*Betty Clark Carlson is an assistant professor and coordinator of the Career Placement Opportunities Project at the Hawaii UAP. Her areas of expertise include vocational/career development and transition planning for persons with disabilities.*