# Work-Related Soft Skills Summer Program: A Case Study

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## Abstract

*Employment issues such as finding full-time jobs with wages that allow for independent living are often worse for youth with disabilities. Lack of soft or social skills has been noted as a major barrier to their workplace success. For youth with cognitive disabilities, not having soft skills places them at a disadvantage in transitioning from school to work. This exploratory study describes a trial summer-long program that focuses on improving school-to-work transition difficulties of youth with cognitive disabilities. This program included three phases: a paid work experience for four days each week, a classroom-based soft skills curriculum for one day each week, and a culminating school-to-work transition training event at the end of the summer. The program followed best practice recommendations. A significant ($p<.05$) positive change in participant self-reported acquisition of soft skills was noted pre-post-program. Comprehensive programs that follow best practice recommendations and include transition support services may be effective in soft skills improvement and may assist in overcoming an employment barrier for this population.*

*Keywords: Cognitive disabilities, soft skills, employment, vocational rehabilitation*

**Introduction**

Youth with cognitive disabilities are legally entitled to transition services. Employment issues, including school-to-work transition, are often worse for youth with disabilities. After high school, most still live with their parents and are either underemployed or unemployed.[1,2] When experts, parents, and youth with disabilities were interviewed about important skills for youth with disabilities to learn, employment skill-building for school-to-work transition was rated as an important employment-directed resource.[3]

People with cognitive disabilities must have the same opportunity as other citizens to become active and valued community members.[4] As they transition from school to work, many youth with cognitive or intellectual disabilities lack access to opportunities and experiences that would allow them to advocate for themselves in the area of employment and financial decisions.[5] Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 showed that many youth with cognitive disabilities were not very likely to take control of their own school-to-work transition planning.[2] In general, support agencies also assumed limited roles in transition planning and youth with cognitive disabilities needed more support services than those with other disabilities. Although half seem to find employment after high school, only about 70% were employed in full-time positions.[2] When successful support services and interventions for youth with disabilities were implemented, future adult employment levels and community resource access were improved.[6]

Successful employment for those with disabilities is associated with employer perception towards inclusion.[7] Lack of employment skills, including soft (e.g., social, interpersonal, communication) skills have been noted as major barriers to their workplace success.[1,8] Soft skills are viewed as increasingly valuable by employers of people with disabilities.[9] Vocational counselors and potential employers for entry-level positions for teens were surveyed and noted positive attitude, flexibility, and soft skills as important for transitioning from school to work.[10] In another study, for those participating in vocational rehabilitation, the most important work-related soft skills included body language and socializing with others.[11] It seems, too, that soft skills were a relatively strong predictor for post-high school employment for youth with disabilities.[12]

Best practices in school-to-work transition vocational rehabilitation services for youth with cognitive disabilities include employment with ongoing support services. In addition, secondary supports, like transition services, as well as soft skills training, have gained promise. It has been recommended, however, that the effects of soft skills training and ongoing support be more thoroughly assessed.[13] For example, in one state, participating in vocational rehabilitation services by youth with cognitive disabilities seemed to positively influence employment.[11] In another state, participating in more customized vocational rehabilitation with contracted employment demonstrated increased effectiveness in moving youth with disabilities toward employment as compared to traditional vocational rehabilitation.[13]

Most vocational rehabilitation agencies use personal social skills training and environmental supports as interventions to improve soft skills in their consumers.[8] Social skills training, role playing social situations and receiving feedback from instructors; is commonly used to develop relationship and problem-solving skills in youth, including those with disabilities.[14] In a meta-analysis, this type of social skills training for youth with cognitive disabilities demonstrated moderate effects, and the school setting seemed to be better able to meet youth needs than the workplace setting.[15] The purpose of this case study was to assess change

in participant self-reported acquisition of soft skills after a trial summer-long program that focused on improving school-to-work transition difficulties of youth with cognitive disabilities.

An agency that provides employment services coordination and community integration for people with disabilities offered an eight-week program during the summer using paid work experience, a day-long school-to-work transition training event, and a standardized work-related soft skills curriculum for adolescent youth and young adults with cognitive disabilities. This program focused on supervised work experience and work-related soft skills, as well as instruction in self-knowledge, independent living, working, and becoming a greater part of their community. This case study reports on the three program phases (e.g., paid work experience, transition planning training event, work-related soft skills curriculum) and participants' change in self-reported acquisition of soft skills.

## Method

*Participants*

Thirty youth with cognitive disabilities attended an eight-week, paid, summer work experience including standardized work-related soft skills curriculum and a transition training event hosted by a regional support agency for people with disabilities. The agency advertised this summer program on their website and encouraged consumers who met the criteria to attend. In order to qualify for the program, participants possessed low-moderate cognitive functioning with deficits in one or more adaptive behaviors (living/communication/social skills). Participants were between the ages of 16- 21 (28/30 high-school aged), all were white, and 63% (19/30) were male.

*Setting*

The agency that provided the employment services was headquartered in a rural area of a Midwest state. The agency contracted with six nearby workplaces including school districts and small business establishments to employ the youth participants.

*Survey*

After Institutional Review Board approval, summer program participants were also invited to participate in a small pre-post program survey. All attendees (with parental/guardian consent and participant assent) agreed to also participate in the survey portion of the program. The Soft Skills Assessment for Secondary Students (SSA) was used by youth participants to self-assess their pre–post program change in work-related soft skills.[7] Using a modified Likert-type scale, the first question asked about their self-perceived awareness level of soft skills. The next eight asked about their self-perceived levels of using the soft skills of communication, confidence, and rapport. Possible total scores ranged from 0-32 with higher scores indicating higher perceived levels of using soft skills. Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) analyses were conducted for both the pre- and post-tests, yielding scores of $\alpha$=0.623 and $\alpha$=0.580, respectively.

*Program phases*

**Phase 1: paid work experience.** A pre-program organizational meeting was held for all small group supervisors who would serve as adult mentors for six groups of five participants as they completed their supervised work experiences and agency staff. Small group supervisors were trained in how to administer the pre-post SSAs in the classroom setting including the assent form. To insure confidentiality, no names were recorded, and code numbers were used on the instruments for all youth participants. After the first week of the program, the small group supervisors administered the Pre-SSA to all youth participants in a classroom or meeting room setting following the specific directions and check sheets from their training. Youth participants were allotted all the time they needed to complete the survey, and the agency staff provided any accommodations. Most participants completed the survey in less than one half hour. The surveys were collected and placed in a sealed envelope and given to a researcher.

To determine the most appropriate workplace for each participant, agency staff, small group supervisors, parent/guardians, and participants met to look through the list of workplaces that volunteered to host participants. Once placements were determined, four days each week over eight weeks, participants in their small groups worked for eight hours each day at one of six work sites (e.g., small businesses or school districts) under the supervision of a site supervisor and the small group supervisor. At the small businesses, participants stocked shelves, cleaned, conducted clerical duties, bagged retail items, and assisted with inventory. At the school districts, they did landscaping, cleaning, maintenance assistance, and working with a team. Also, as a typical employee would, participants were given two 15-minute breaks and a lunch break during their daily shift. Each week, small group supervisors and site supervisors provided oral and written work-related job skills feedback to participants regarding their satisfaction with the participants' workplace skills and behaviors. Check sheets were completed on each participant by the supervisors who rated them on independence level in performing their clerical, maintenance or other tasks as well as their behaviors such as timeliness, appropriate dress, working with others on a team, and coping with set-backs. Each week, supervisors met with participants and discussed their observations either formally or informally.

**Phase 2: standardized work-related soft skills curriculum.** One day each week for a half day, all participants in their small groups attended classroom lessons in the Skills to Pay the Bills educational curriculum taught by agency staff.[16] The curriculum, created by the Office of Disability Employment Policy, focused on work-related interpersonal soft skills for teens and young adults, including those with disabilities. Although no staff supervisors observed to ensure fidelity, all staff reported following the lesson plans provided. Instruction included six modules that used active-learning strategies for workforce readiness/soft skills topics including; module 1: communication – providing and receiving information; module 2: attitude- enthusiasm and positive thinking in the workplace; module 3: teamwork – roles and conduct as a team member; module 4: networking – interview guidelines and social networks; module 5: critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making; and module 6: professionalism – integration of all of the module skills. To meet the needs of youth with disabilities, the curriculum directed instructional staff to use a variety of teaching methods targeted to all learning styles.[16]

**Phase 3: day-long, school-to-work transition training event.** In addition to the soft skills curriculum, a one-day school-to-work transition planning event was held towards the end of the summer program. Taught by agency staff, the event included sessions, games, and activities. Sessions covered employment preparation, vocational development, self-determination, self-advocacy, independent living, and community engagement using lecture and discussion methods. Session content was then immediately applied through skills practice. For example, participants engaged in communication and job interview role playing activities to apply what they have learned. As a culminating activity, participants created goals for future employment as well as used transition-planning tools such as self-assessments, planning guides, job resource work sheets, job interview tips handouts, transitional living resources list, and lists of support agencies and services in the area to chart a path to meet those goals. On the last day of the program, small group supervisors administered the Post-SSA to all youth participants in a classroom or meeting room

setting following the specific directions and check sheets from training. The surveys were collected and placed in a sealed envelope and given to a researcher.

**Results**

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted for only those tests that could be matched pre-post, and aggregated means were then compared. Initially, all 30 youth participants completed the pre-SSA; however, only 16 completed the post-SSA. Some did not complete their post-tests due to social-emotional difficulties. Small group supervisors reported that during the post-test session, some youth participants were having behavioral and emotional difficulties that day. Only matched pre-post SSAs, therefore, were assessed. The results of the paired-samples t-test, assessing differences in soft-skills scores between the pre- and post-SSAs (n=16), revealed a statistically significant difference between the pre-test (M=20.56, SD=4.98) and the post-test (M=23.56, SD=4.13) ($t(15)=-3.105$, $p<.05$).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this case study was to assess change in participant self-reported acquisition of soft skills after a trial summer-long program that focused on improving school-to-work transition difficulties of youth with cognitive disabilities. Following best practice recommendations for employment support, a summer-long program was conducted and included three phases: a paid work experience for four days each week, a classroom-based soft skills curriculum for one day each week, and a culminating school-to-work transition training event at the end of the summer. A significant positive change in participant self-reported acquisition of soft skills was noted pre-post-program.

*Limitations*

In regards to the utilization of the SSA and evaluating individual attainment of soft skills, there is always a risk in using a self-report instrument. While there is no specific reason to believe that participants were not truthful about their evaluations of their own abilities, participant self-assessment could have introduced personal bias in their skills. Additionally, this program was conducted in a single location in a single state, thus, compromising the generalizability of the results. While the pre-post assessment design utilized in this study was sufficient to assess changes in participant self-reported soft skills, future programs should include an adequate control group design or supervisor observation to better determine if changes were truly attributed to the program itself. It is also important that the shortcomings of the instrument used in this study are addressed. Future studies should continue to examine Cronbach's alpha scores in the SSA among different populations to determine whether the internal consistency reliability of the instrument is truly acceptable.

*Implications*

Lack of soft skills in youth with cognitive disabilities places them at a disadvantage in transitioning from school to work.[10] Participant self-report of soft skills acquisition in this program significantly increased pre- to post-program providing some support for the comprehensive vocational, curricular, and special event style of programming implemented by this agency. Best practices recommend ongoing support and social skills training which this program included with its small group mentors, staff support, planning event, and soft skills curriculum.[11] In addition, summer is a good time for those with cognitive disabilities to obtain this extra work experience and continuing support and training.

Most vocational rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities emphasize social skills training and community supports, especially in the school-based setting, with modest results.[15] This program, though, was conducted mainly in the work setting with classroom-style lessons only once each week and a full-day transition planning event. Reinforcement and application of curricular and work-setting lessons was also provided during the special event as participants set goals and planned for their future employment. Providing work and social skills training using a summer program can be attempted by other employment or vocational rehabilitation agencies to continue to improve on any positive results gained during the school year.

The format of the program with its lecture-lab arrangement and the special event that tied all of the pieces together may help to explain the improvement in participant self-reported soft skills. Use of the standardized curriculum with active-learning strategies possibly reinforced the social skills messages received from the small group and employer supervisors every day at work. The opportunity to practice skills in each of the curricular topic areas that were similar to their daily work experiences may have emphasized the importance of workforce readiness and social skills to the participants

Future research should be done to determine the effects of soft skills training and ongoing support in vocational rehabilitation.[10] When soft skills were assessed in participants pre- to post-program, significant positive change in self-reported acquisition of soft skills was noted. Conclusions that can be drawn are limited, and caution should be exercised in interpretation of the results, due to small sample size. Many youth with cognitive disabilities, however, lack access to activities and opportunities such as this program.[4] If results of this exploratory trial program are established in larger programs, comprehensive programs such as this one may assist in overcoming an employment barrier in this population. In conclusion, agencies that provide employment services for people with disabilities do not take large roles in transition planning.[2] However, in this program, the agency not only provided work placement and a skills-based based curriculum for youth participants, but also planned a full-day event using active-learning methods to teach important transition skills. Youth with cognitive disabilities need more support services than youth with other disabilities.[2] If results of more complete studies confirm the preliminary results found in this program, it seems that comprehensive programming that includes transition support services may be effective in soft skills improvement. Although it may take more time and effort for agencies to plan and implement more wide-ranging programming, it may better meet the needs of youth and young adults with cognitive disabilities.

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