

The Effects of Vocational Rehabilitation for Students With Disabilities

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Abstract

It is an unfortunate reality that students with severe disabilities are not always offered the same post-graduation opportunities as their peers. The pressure on students to choose their future careers and make a plan to reach their goals can be scary. Vocational rehabilitation is a great way for students to break into the workforce and can be an opportunity for students to secure long-term employment. Vocational rehabilitation provides students with a path to employment that they otherwise may not receive. The intent of these services is to provide students and young adults with disabilities who are in the transitional period of their lives with the skills they need to flourish in the workforce. It is a great way for students to break into the workforce and can be an opportunity for students to secure long-term employment. Based on research published in various articles published by PsychINFO, the data supporting vocational rehabilitation is strong.

Employment is something that all students consider as they reach the end of high school. At only 18 years old, students are expected to choose their future careers and form a plan to reach that goal. It is a lot of pressure for any student to handle, but can be especially daunting for a student with severe disabilities.

Students with severe disabilities are not always given the same opportunities after graduation as their peers. While students in the general education classroom are offered internships, college-planning sessions, and more, students with disabilities are often forgotten about in this process. Unfortunately, some educators do not see their students with disabilities as capable of

achieving the same things as the rest of their students. As stated in *A Brief Introduction to Social Role Valorization* by Wolf Wolfensberger, “Competency and social image form a very powerful feedback loop that can be either positive or negative” (Wolfensberger, 2013, p. 99). If educators do not believe that their students with disabilities have the competencies to succeed in the workforce, then society will perceive them that way as well. To combat this stigma and increase the instances of positive employment opportunities for students with disabilities, schools and places of employment have created vocational rehabilitation services and employer-based interventions. The goals and intentions of

these programs align with the characteristics of the third wave of the disability movement, such as “empowerment, self-determination, and community inclusion” (Agran et al., 2014).

This literature review seeks to answer the following question: what are the effects of vocational rehabilitations and employer-based interventions on employment outcomes of young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 with autism?

Methods

The database used to search for articles to review was PsycINFO. The search terms used consisted of *employment*, *autism*, *vocational rehabilitation*, and *employment outcomes*, and the age was limited to adulthood (18 years or older). The publication dates for articles were restricted from 2015 to 2020. From those procedures, 25 articles were produced in total.

To determine which of the 25 articles were to be used, the following inclusion criteria were applied: the search only included peer-reviewed academic journals, the article used vocational rehabilitation or employer-based intervention as the independent variable, and the participants of the study included people with autism who are between 16-25 years old. With these criteria, 20 articles were excluded and 5 were chosen for this review.

Review

There were a total of 104,547 participants between all 5 studies, which took place in high schools and public vocational rehabilitation centers over a long period of time. The age range of these participants varied from as young as 16 to as old as 25.

The participants chosen represented a wide range of demographics and disabilities. There were both male and female participants, African American, caucasian, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American and Alaskan native participants.

All individuals had autism spectrum disorder, some had a co-occurring intellectual disability, and others had a co-occurring physical disability. In one study (Alverson and Yamamoto, 2018), some participants had co-occurring anxiety and/or depression. The main independent variables of these studies were PS-ASD and vocational rehabilitation. For these studies, data was collected on the employment outcomes for those who received vocational rehabilitation services compared to those who did not. Researchers analyzed the data to evaluate whether or not the vocational rehabilitation services had successful, long term effects.

Discussion

The outcomes across all studies were overwhelmingly positive. The results of the studies showed that people who participated in vocational rehabilitation had a higher successful competitive employment rate compared to those who did not. This rate increased even more for the participants who received a higher number of services.

In the 2017 Alverson and Yamamoto study (shown in table 1 below), the effects of vocational rehabilitation for people with autism were not as successful as anticipated. 25% of participants completed the study without gainful employment. While the results from this study are poor, the context of the study is important. “VR clients with ASD are far more likely, regardless of individual demographic, or service characteristics, to not become employed” (Alverson and Yamamoto, 2017). This study took place over the course of ten years and during the Great Recession, where disparities in employment rates between people with and without disabilities was even greater than usual.

The outcomes also show that vocational rehabilitation can help bridge the gender wage gap between men and women with disabilities. According to the 2015 study by

Sung et al., the average hourly wage of men and women who were employed after participating in vocational rehabilitation were similar, at \$8.88 an hour (Sung et al., 2015). This is a positive outcome for both vocational rehabilitation, as well as a step towards gender equality.

Based on the information presented in this literature review, teachers and other professionals should advocate for vocational rehabilitation to be in our schools. This could be incorporated into the school day as an inclusive classroom where any student interested could benefit from vocational rehabilitation. High school students should be able to select vocational rehabilitation to be a part of their daily schedule, much like they can select concurrent enrollment or career exploration programs. During this class, they would develop skills that would prepare them for a career, and potentially even pair with companies who may turn out to be future employers. The long-term goal of vocational rehabilitation being presented as an option in schools is to equip students with

the tools they need to succeed in their future career. Vocational rehabilitation is a great way to break into the workforce and an alternative option to college for those who want it.

There are a few limitations to the studies included in this review. First, the 2017 study by Wehman et al. only sampled a group of 49 participants (Wehman et al., 2017). This is a very small sample size, and the next time this study is performed the researchers plan to triple these numbers. Within the same study, there was a lower retention rate among the control group than hoped for. These are factors that can certainly limit the findings of these studies, but not necessarily invalidate them.

In any future research on this topic, the studies could benefit from including participants with disabilities other than autism. Three of the five included studies only allowed participants with autism, and the research could be more accurate if people with all disabilities were represented.

Table 1

<u>Citation</u>	<u>Participants (age, gender, disability)</u>	<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Outcomes</u>
Wehman et al., 2017.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: between 18-21 • Gender: male and female • Disability: ASD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project SEARCH-autism Spectrum Disorder Supports (PS-ASD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The experimental group "achieved community-based employment at 74.2% at graduation", while the control group achieved only 5.9%.
Alverson, C. Y., & Yamamoto, S. H. 2018.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: between 18-21 • Gender: male and female • Disability: ASD and secondary disability other than intellectual disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational Rehabilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Overall client employment rate of 37.57%".
Ditchman, N. M., Miller, J. L., & Easton, A. B. (2018).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: between 16-24 • Gender: male and female • Disability: ASD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational Rehabilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who were employed at the end of the study had received a significantly higher number of services compared to those who were unemployed.
Alverson, C. Y., & Yamamoto, S. H. (2017).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: high school to college aged students • Gender: male and female • Disability: ASD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational Rehabilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not as successful as anticipated, 25% of participants with VR services finished the study without employment.
Sung et al., 2015.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: between 16-25 • Gender: male and female • Disability: ASD, or ASD and co-occurring intellectual disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational Rehabilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful competitive employment rate was 51% • Average hourly wage of men and women were similar (\$8.88 an hour average) • Men worked more hours per week (23.3) compared to women (21).

Literature research articles found that include search words: employment, autism, vocational rehabilitation, and employment outcomes

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Recommended Citation

Boyles, E. (2021). The effects of vocational rehabilitation for students with disabilities. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/paper-23>