

The Road to Work: Youth With Disabilities and Their Views on Employment and the ADA

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Background: Research indicates that transition-age youth with disabilities face several obstacles with regard to finding employment. However, research on the extent to which barriers and facilitators differ across disability types and contexts is lacking.

Objective: The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to understand employment-related challenges encountered by a cross-section of transition-age youth with disabilities across multiple settings. In addition, the study also examined transition-aged youth's knowledge and use of rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Methods: We adopted a focus group strategy to understand the barriers faced by transition-aged youth with disabilities; five focus groups were conducted at five community-based locations in three states (Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia) in Federal Region 3 (i.e., Mid-Atlantic). Participants ranged in age from 16 to 24 (53.5% male; 44.2% White).

Findings: Findings indicated that youth with disabilities faced several barriers in the form of stigma, lack of workplace supports and accommodations, their disability condition, and anxiety. In addition, a very small proportion of the sample were aware about the ADA and their rights under Title I.

Conclusions: Findings highlight the need to develop programs that equip transition-aged youth with disabilities with the necessary skills as they prepare to enter the work force. In addition, efforts should be targeted at addressing the barriers identified in the study, such as stigma, as well as at increase students' knowledge of the ADA by embedding information within secondary and postsecondary academic curricula.

Keywords: transition-age youth; youth with disabilities; ADA; barriers; employment

Transitioning from school to the world of work is a challenging prospect for all adolescents and young adults, particularly for youth with disabilities who often encounter additional obstacles on their road to adulthood (Samuels, 2015). These might include learning to self-advocate in the workplace, finding sufficient services and supports to assist in the job search, and having access to the opportunity structures needed to secure quality jobs and careers (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2018). Indeed, research suggests that compared to youth without disabilities, youth with disabilities

are significantly more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to get employed after high school, are less likely to work full-time, and when employed, earn lower wages than their peers without disabilities (e.g., Butterworth et al., 2018; Houtenville & Boege, 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Yin et al., 2014).

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Both the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 (P.L. 113–128), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (P.L. 101–336) provide specific provisions and protections for people with disabilities, including youth. WIOA emphasizes competitive integrated employment for youth with disabilities, and significantly restricts subminimum wages for all people with disabilities, including those placed in sheltered workshops. The ADA enacted in 1990 (P.L. 101–336) provides legal protections against discrimination based on disability, although it requires protected individuals, those whose impairments meet the requirements of the law, to disclose their conditions in order to invoke their rights under Title I to request workplace accommodations. As numerous studies of adults with disabilities have found (Gold et al., 2012; Goldberg et al., 2005; Jans et al., 2012), this requirement can heighten the risk for job seekers and employees, who fear that disability disclosure can evoke negative stereotypes, and thus actually reduce rather than enhance their job access, opportunities, and success. Similar reluctance on the part of youth with disabilities to request workplace accommodations was found in a systematic review of 27 studies examining the patterns of workplace disclosure and accommodation requests among diverse samples of this population (Lindsay et al., 2018).

In addition to anxieties regarding accommodation requests, transitioning youth can encounter other obstacles in accessing competitive employment. For example, studies have found that youth with disabilities lack opportunities for work-based experiences during their secondary school careers (Carter et al., 2011; Cease-cook et al., 2015), a factor that can depress or delay the acquisition of basic work skills, such as getting along with others or asking for help. Parent and teacher expectations regarding career-related activities for all youth, including those with disabilities, can exert a powerful influence on youth self-efficacy, career choice, and aspirations (e.g., Blustein et al., 2016; Garcia et al., 2015). Moreover, lack of or inadequate access to services and resources from vocational rehabilitation programs, schools, and community providers to assist with their transition from school to work can serve as a significant systemic barrier to employment for this population (General Accountability Office [GAO], 2012).

Whether the obstacles to work are attributed to environmental factors, negative attitudes, or individual characteristics (Lindsay et al., 2018), it is clear that youth with disabilities continue to lag behind their peers in securing quality jobs in the community (Ruggles et al., 2019). Several studies have explored youths' perceptions of the challenges and barriers to finding and securing employment. For example, Lindsay (2011) analyzed survey results from the 2006 Canadian Participation and Activity Limitation Survey to compare employment-related barriers reported by youth with disabilities compared to their peers without, concluding that the former encountered myriad challenges, including stigma, discrimination, and reduced performance expectations by employers. Their study also found that youth with disabilities frequently attributed the workplace barriers they encountered to their disabilities, such as its functional severity, its visibility, or both. Lindsay et al. (2015) found similar results in a qualitative study of employment-related barriers perceived by youth with physical disabilities compared to their nondisabled peers. Findings showed that youth with physical disabilities perceived lower expectations regarding employment-related outcomes by peers, parents, and employers, and that youth themselves, as well as their parents and employers, attributed job-related challenges to their health conditions or impairments. Noel et al. (2016) surveyed 280 transition-age youth with developmental and psychiatric impairments regarding their perceptions of barriers to employment, reporting their lack of work-based experience, as well as their perceptions of the limitations of their disabilities, impeded their road to work.

The studies briefly reviewed here shed light on the perceptions of transition-age youth with disabilities in regard to employment-related barriers, including decisions about disability disclosure in the workplace. However, key gaps in the literature remain, such as the extent to which both the barriers and facilitators youth with disabilities perceive related to getting and keeping a job are similar across disability types and contexts, and relatedly, their knowledge and use of their rights under the ADA. In addition, a majority of the studies cited above have been conducted using Canadian samples. Given that the U.S. employment landscape may be different for youth with disabilities, it is important to examine if the findings from those studies (e.g. Lindsay,

2011; Lindsay et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2015) can be applied to youth with disabilities in the United States. This focus group study was conducted with the purpose of exploring the perceptions of a cross-section of youth with disabilities regarding the personal, environmental, and legal circumstances that promote or curtail their access to jobs, and the extent they rely on the ADA to mitigate employment barriers. Given the recent emphasis on work-related experiences and paid employment for youth with disabilities under the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, the results of this study can assist special education teachers, transition specialists, and vocational rehabilitation counselors to assess and implement interventions that prepare youth to anticipate employment barriers and invoke their rights under the ADA to address them.

Research questions guiding the study:

- 1) What are the employment-related challenges perceived or encountered by a cross-section of transition-age youth with disabilities across multiple settings?
- 2) What is the extent to which a cross-section of transition-age youth are knowledgeable about and use their rights under the ADA?

METHODS

Sample

The focus groups were conducted at five community-based locations in three states (Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia) in Federal Region 3 (i.e., Mid-Atlantic) between late spring 2017 until spring 2019, under the auspices of the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center (www.adainfo.org). One of the focus groups was conducted at a secondary school 18- to 21-year program, one was conducted at the career resource center of a major Mid-Atlantic university, one was conducted at an independent living center in suburban Virginia, and the other two were at community rehabilitation provider organizations. Demographic information on participants' age range, gender, race, education, employment status, living situation, geographic location, and type of disability were collected.¹ Participants ranged in age from 16 to 24, with the majority (62.8%) being ages 18–20; and two

of the participants being under age 18. The majority of participants were male (53.5%) and 44.2% were White. The majority of participants had a high school diploma (36%) and 39% had some college or an associate's degree. Most of the participants (81%) lived at home with their families, and the majority described their geographic location as suburban (59.5%). Self-reported disability status of participants varied widely: autism (16.4%), intellectual disability/developmental disability (IDD; 23.6%), physical disability (3.6%), sensory disability (5.5%), mental health disability (25.5%), and learning disability (16.4%). Participants were asked to check all disabilities that applied to them; 50% selected any one category, 28% selected two categories; 18.8% chose three categories, while 3% chose four categories of disabilities. See Table 1 for more information on demographic breakdown.

Procedures

After receiving approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), research staff used convenience sampling methods to recruit participants from four community program providers and/or independent living centers and the career resource center of a major Mid-Atlantic university that expressed a willingness to assist us on this project. Recruitment logistics were planned in collaboration with each of the five sites, who distributed the focus group invitation flyers within their agencies and organizations, which included a phone number to contact research staff to: (a) verify their eligibility for the study, (b) request additional information; and (c) ascertain their availability for the date and time of the focus group planned for that site. Youth focus groups included 6–12 participants, and each focus group included at least one staff member from the host organization who was allowed to observe the proceedings.

A focus group methodology was selected for this study in order to elicit narrative data regarding perceptions of employment and the ADA among our target population; as well as to stimulate discussion between participants. Each focus group was facilitated by two project research staff, one of whom conducted the group, and the second who monitored the audio recording, took notes, and helped facilitate discussion. We used a semistructured focus group

TABLE 1. Participant Demographic Information (N = 43)

Demographic Information	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Gender		
Male	23	54.8
Female	19	45.2
Race		
White	19	44.2
African American/Black	14	32.6
Other minorities	10	23.25
Age Range		
16–20 years	27	62.8
21–23 years	12	27.9
23–24 years	4	9.3
Education level		
Some high school, no diploma	5	13.9
High school diploma	13	36.1
Some college credit, no degree	14	38.9
Associate degree	3	8.3
Employment status		
Competitive employment	14	32.56
Not employed	8	18.60
Student	27	62.79
Type of disability		
Autism	9	16.4
Intellectual disability/ developmental disability	13	23.6
Physical disability	2	3.6
Sensory disability	3	5.5
Mental health disability	14	25.5
Learning disability	9	16.4
Other	5	9.1
Living area		
Rural	5	11.9
Small town	8	19
Suburban	25	59.9
Urban	4	9.5

Note. Number of participants may not add up to 43 because of missing data. For type of disability, number of participants exceeds 43 because several participants had multiple types of disabilities.

interview guide consisting of nine questions, which addressed three broad areas: (a) job search experiences; (b) how disability affected getting or keeping a job; (c) knowledge and use of the ADA and workplace accommodations.

All participants were given the opportunity to discuss the focus of the research prior to giving consent, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant, as well as parental consent for the two members under the age of 18. Four of

the five focus group sessions were audio-taped to ensure accuracy of the record. At the end of the focus group, each participant received a \$25.00 gift card, as well as a packet of information from the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center about the law and their rights.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted using procedures outlined in a modified grounded theory approach, where a structured interview was used to gather data from participants across the five focus groups (Anderson et al., 2014). The first and second authors conducted independent open coding of the verbatim transcripts, which included over 300 pages of material. The two raters independently reviewed each of the transcripts, and noted general themes as well as subcategories. A subsequent meeting was conducted to review the themes and categories in order to identify similarities and differences, with the goal of achieving consensus. A second independent rating then occurred, with each rater reviewing self-derived themes, and comparing those to the other rater. A final debrief meeting was conducted to discuss coding differences on thematic categories until the two raters reached agreement regarding discrepancies. The final analyses included four major themes. This approach is similar to the content-analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which researchers first independently code the transcriptions, identify core concepts, meet again to discuss discrepancies and then obtain consensus to develop final codes. As there were only two raters, inter-rater reliability is not calculated, but is incorporated into the qualitative coding process. This approach is popular and has been adopted by other researchers analyzing focus group data in the area of disabilities research (e.g. Hernandez et al., 2008).

RESULTS

Our focus group findings demonstrate that youth with disabilities encounter several barriers that could affect their ability to find and keep employment. Five major themes were identified. The themes along with the elements that fall under those themes are described below.

Theme I: Stigma

Data analysis indicated that stigma was a major barrier endorsed by a majority of the participants across all the five locations. Participants described situations in which they believed that the stigma attached to their disabilities served as a barrier in different ways.

For example, a participant described how stigma attached to disabilities affects the chances of being hired:

People don't want to hire people who are unreliable—people with disabilities are sometimes unreliable—if you are honest and tell them that there are times when you will not be able to show up for work, that's a red flag.

Another participant described a similar struggle:

I have bipolar disorder which has a pretty high stigma in America and so I struggle a lot. I haven't done it in a job situation but in other situations like school and other things finding myself having not just explain the accommodation but explain why I need it and not what's wrong with me but like basically that . . . What are we supposed to do if you do this, if you do that, if you break something in a fit of rage? And I was like I'm not going to do that and I started bringing like Mayo Clinic printouts of like bipolar disorder. I'm not going to fly into a fit of rage. This is just what I need for the accommodation but I feel like that's a lot of emotional labor just to do something.

Another participant talked about how stigma prevented her from disclosing a disability because:

Some people who don't have disabilities think that people with disabilities are different. It's just their mindset . . . People see it and assume that I can't do everything they ask. They're like oh you're probably not capable of doing whatever task.

Another participant described how they had experienced a similar issue at work:

I know when people think less of me. I have always had that sense for that kind of stuff.

Lastly, some participants also described how they had lost their jobs and how they felt victimized and discriminated against because of stigma associated with their disabilities. For example, one participant said,

I've actually been fired before because of my disabilities, mainly just a reaction from a medication for my bipolar disorder caused me to have seizures and the doctor's notes weren't really I guess enough because their thing was they needed a more reliable person.

Theme 2: Availability of Workplace Supports and Accommodations

Youth across all five locations had lively conversations about how lack of support from their boss/coworkers as well as lack of accommodations affected them in various ways.

For example, one participant mentioned how they quit their job because of lack of support from their manager:

[At] my last job, the manager wasn't cooperating with me. She told us in the interview she would help but then wouldn't help. I ended up leaving because of that. When my job coach was there, she'd help, but when she wasn't there, she'd ignore me.

Another participant described feeling unsupported at the workplace:

I had a job and I had accommodation. If I was feeling overwhelmed, I go to go outside and take a break or go walk. I worked at {name of place} as a server. I didn't like

it. My boss got fired and had interviewed me and gave me accommodations. The new guy was a jerk. I have anger issues. He [new boss] kept and kept watching me and that angered me. He asked where are you going and it wasn't like I could go anywhere. I went to the hospital one day and I gave a note. They lost my note and then pulled me in and said I didn't get a notice and they'd fire me. So, I put my resignation in.

When asked about the challenges they may have faced at work, another participant mentioned "coworkers yelling at you."

Another participant mentioned how lack of physical/environmental supports also served as a barrier:

I work in a big building and the challenge is that if my supervisor is down here on the ground floor and I'm all the way on the third floor, I can't drop everything and go find her around the whole entire building to say there is a problem or so that he's now stopped everybody from having their cell phones on us at work and when we have to contact the supervisor.

However, some participants did mention that they received supports and accommodations at their workplace and how it helped them significantly.

For example, when asked about people and accommodations at work, one participant said:

Well they [people at work] are always there to help us. So like if I have any questions like on the personnel files I can ask them and then since I really like my supervisor at work I also ask for her. She's very helpful.

On similar lines, another participant shared:

I'm going to be a walker, helper, help elder people in an assisted living and an independent living for my grandmother's community and put walkers away. They all know me. If I

mess up, they'll understand and they'll help me out.

Another participant, who is currently a student, mentioned that they are receiving accommodations as a student for their disability and have had positive experiences related to it:

I have [accommodations] for dyslexia and ADHD, so I get more time on tests and note takers.

Theme 3: Disability Condition

A significant proportion of youth indicated that their disability condition was a barrier in itself as it limited employment opportunities. For example, one participant's frustration was clearly reflected as they described how the physical constraints imposed by their disability greatly impacted their job options:

I have neuropathy in my feet and like extreme nerve damage, so I can't do any type of job where I'm standing on my feet for too long. That prevents me from working a lot of different jobs, especially within my age group. And my experience right now, because I don't have my bachelor's degree yet, I'm still at the in-between where I don't have enough experience, so most of the jobs that I have to work now are sort of labor jobs or like receptionist type jobs. The thing about receptionist type jobs is that they want to have experience as a receptionist. I'm like, yeah, I can't get the experience if you don't hire me.

On similar lines, another participant talked about how his psychiatric disability affected his chances of employment:

For me, it's that I would have to work by myself because I don't really like a lot of noise like yelling, screaming. Basically, I would have to tell my boss to give me a job where there is—like I have my own office and I can shut my door because I do have a

lot of anger issues. When somebody yells, I would have a hard time trying to focus on work and would focus on other people.

Lastly, when asked if their disabilities affected their job performance, a good proportion of the participants believed that it did. One participant said:

Yeah, I'm autistic and ADHD. I get hyper at certain times, so I can't focus but I try to stay on task.

Theme 4: Anxiety

Another major theme that emerged from our focus group analysis was anxiety. It served as a barrier in not only obtaining jobs but also maintaining employment.

For example, one participant explained how interviewing for a job would be an anxiety-provoking situation for them:

Generally, I can do the whole application process and if I pass that stage and then I do fine with group interviews but the one on one interviews I get really anxious and I just kind of freeze up.

In response to that statement, another participant shared a similar experience:

I experience something similar when I'm talking one on one, say I'm talking to the boss or whoever is offering the job, I get really over stimulated—I just get really anxious in the moment and it seems like everything is coming at me at once so I try my best but I think I come off as kind of ditsy.

Another participant at another location described how anxiety affected their ability to keep their job:

If I make a mistake when I'm doing the public transit on the way to work, I have a panic

attack and I shut down and I have needed to call out from my shift. And of course, if you keep calling out from your shift either they're going to let you go or they're going to just be like hey what's up?

On similar lines, another participant at another location mentioned how their anxiety affected their job performance:

I've had instances where there was like a meeting in a certain room and I messed up the room number and stuff like that.

Theme 5: Self-Issues

We identified this broad theme, which included elements related to self that served as barriers. Elements falling under this theme are lack of self-confidence, dependency, and overcompensating for disability.

An example of lack of self-confidence as a barrier was exemplified by the following participant:

I've never had a job that lasted more than two to three months and some of the jobs were like seasonal positions, but all of them have lasted anywhere between a day and a few months and it just really—it's frustrating and it like it's wearing and it makes me feel not good about myself and it really just makes it harder to keep going back to it.

Related to lack of self-confidence, a handful of participants also mentioned how they were overly dependent on other family members. They acknowledged that while family support was helpful, it also limited them in certain ways. For example, one participant said:

So, like I have a little bit of social anxiety that comes with my disability and I also find it difficult to look for jobs easily. It's like my mom helps me usually. Like she's someone who usually helps me get a job. But I know as I get older, I need to do it myself but then I don't know where to start or like sometimes

when I'm researching, I'm like oh, I'll apply but I usually apply online because I don't really like going in person.

A few participants also mentioned how they tended to take on more responsibility than they could handle to overcompensate for their disability. For example, one participant shared:

I tend to over-book myself but also part of me doesn't want to say I don't know how to do something because I don't want them to have to teach me or look like I'm not an expertise on the subject so then I'll just be like yeah, I know how to do that for you and then I feel like I tend to over-book myself or get myself in a task where I don't really have as much experience as I would have liked.

Lack of Knowledge About the ADA

In addition to asking about barriers and facilitators regarding access to jobs, each group of participants were also asked if they knew what the ADA was, and whether they had ever requested accommodations under Title I of it. Our findings suggested that a small proportion of the sample were aware of the ADA, and their rights under Title I (approximately 23%), although it is notable that most of the participants familiar with the ADA were college students. Participants were also asked if they had ever requested a workplace accommodation and if they would be comfortable requesting one. Once again, findings revealed that only a handful of participants (approximately 9%) had requested workplace accommodations, and that a majority of them would be hesitant or feel uncomfortable asking for them, even though the majority indicated receiving and benefitting from academic accommodations in school-based settings.

DISCUSSION

Past research has highlighted challenges faced by transition-age youth with disabilities. However, our understanding of barriers and facilitators of obtaining and maintaining employment as well as the

knowledge and use of ADA across disability types and contexts is limited. Thus, the aims of the current qualitative focus group study were to gain an understanding of various factors that promoted or hindered job access among a cross-section of youth with disabilities, and to examine the extent to which their knowledge and use of ADA provisions helped them in obtaining and maintaining their jobs.

Our findings highlight the challenges that persist for youth with disabilities as they transition to the world of work—these challenges can be ascribed to the individual (anxiety, psychological perceptions of disability, and self-efficacy), as well as to the workplace (inadequate supports, employment discrimination/stigma).

First, across settings and disability types, a central theme emerging across the entire sample was perceptions of stigma and employment discrimination. This finding, of course, is similar to others cited earlier in the paper, where reports of people with disabilities describing experiences with negative stereotypes from employers, supervisors, or coworkers, either real or perceived, impede their job search and job acquisition (Gold et al., 2012; Lindstrom et al., 2013). Not surprisingly, given prior studies (Hernandez, 2013), there were no differences in stigma-related perceptions experienced by the youth whether he or she had an apparent or nonapparent disability. This finding is consistent with other studies, where perceived stigma, and resulting fears of requesting workplace accommodations to avoid evoking stigma, are similar across disability groups (e.g., Matthews & Harrington, 2000). Related to this issue, we found that perceived stigma, and fear of evoking it by disclosing was equally identified by college students with mental health or learning disabilities, as it was by young adults with IDD enrolled in a secondary school certificate program. Perceptions and experiences of stigma in the workplace remain, unfortunately, a constant in the lives of youth with disabilities across settings, types, and contexts.

Second, and perhaps related, we found that youth across settings and disability types tended to attribute the challenges they encountered in finding or securing a job to their health or disability-related conditions. Again, this theme was evenly distributed across the five focus groups, and across individuals with high or low incidence disabilities. For example, one of the participants from the focus group con-

ducted among university students expressed this even though one of her friends expected her to work and take college credits, “I feel like I’m a bad person. because . . . I’m disabled, I’m not going to take on certain amount of work.” Similarly, a focus group participant from an independent living center said, “I have a brain injury so it’s like every day is a new day . . . should [the supervisor] have to teach me the same thing every day?” This finding was similar to that of Noel et al. (2016), who identified that the individual’s perceptions of health or disability condition was one of the major barriers to employment.

Another theme that emerged was how perceptions of the “self”—self-efficacy, self-confidence, as well as efforts undertaken to “compensate” for their perceived health or disability-related conditions affected their perceptions of barriers. Self-efficacy is defined as one’s perceived ability to do things to be successful (Bandura, 1997). In our focus group interviews, self-efficacy with regard to personal agency or control over challenges and barriers encountered in employment situations was a major issue across the groups, even when these youth could describe how their specific skills or attributes were matched to work demands. For example, one person said, “It’s like going into an interview and knowing they’re not going to hire someone [like me] because my illnesses are silent.” This finding is in line with previous research demonstrating lower levels of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-determination in youth with disabilities (Carter et al., 2006; Shattuck et al., 2014).

The existence of workplace supports, and the extent to which they could be relied on, was another issue raised by the participants in this study. As expected, and in line with prior research (e.g., Banks et al., 2011), we found that a majority of the participants experienced a lack of support from their managers, supervisors, and colleagues, and it impacted them negatively. Lack of supports were experienced in different forms, such as misunderstanding from supervisors or colleagues with regard to their disabilities (e.g., “coworkers yelling at you for performance problems”), and lack of physical and environmental supports (e.g., not having a private/quiet place to work, not being allowed to use cell phones), both of which hindered job performance.

In contrast, positive workplace supports (in the form of help or informal accommodations from supervisors and colleagues), although experienced

by only a handful of our participants, were associated with positive psychological and workplace outcomes. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Carter & Lunsford, 2005), this finding underscores the benefits of accommodations—both formal and informal, and the need to prepare youth across disability categories to request them.

Related to this point, it is discouraging to note how few of these youth across disability types and settings had knowledge and/or experience with the ADA and their rights under Title I. That this was the case, even though most of these youth could offer examples of academic accommodations they had received in high school or college, suggests the need for some critical interventions that would benefit youth during their transition years. Several of the employment challenges the youth participants raised in the focus groups—such as losing jobs for performance problems, or overcompensating for disability, might have been mitigated had they requested workplace accommodations, but these participants both lacked clear knowledge of their rights to accommodations under Title I, and may have believed that disclosing their disability in order to invoke their rights could give rise to stigma and disability stereotypes. This finding has been replicated across disability types and settings (e.g., Dalgin & Gilbride, 2003; Gold et al., 2012; Hernandez et al., 2007), a factor that probably contributes significantly to disparities in employment for people with disabilities, and highlights the need for expanding and infusing training around the ADA throughout school curricula, and strengthening the enforcement of disability rights under the law (Befort, 2013).

Implications

Our study reveals several important practical implications. In our focus group analysis, we identified several barriers in obtaining and maintaining employment for transition-age youth with disabilities. These barriers were related to self with regard to disability (e.g., lack of self—efficacy, anxiety), attitudes of others (e.g., stigma), and environmental factors (e.g., lack of workplace supports). Development of interventions to effectively cope with anxiety specifically in relation to employment in this population would be beneficial. In addition, our findings also highlight the need to develop psycho-

social interventions to improve perceptions of self among youth with disabilities, such as self-advocacy training, one of the five mandated preemployment transition services under the WIOA, as well as more intensive coaching around disclosure and invoking their rights under the law.

Finally, information derived from the focus group transcripts indicated that of those youth who reported working, the majority tended to be employed in the retail (such as grocery stores) or food service (such as restaurants) industries. Given the economic forecasts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Coibion et al., 2020), it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which employment of youth with disabilities, which already lagged behind that of their peers (e.g., ChildTrends, 2019), will be further depressed, particularly given their perceptions and experiences with negative stereotypes on the part of businesses, and the dramatic unemployment of people with disabilities that occurred during the last economic downturn, the Great Recession of 2007–2009. These new realities require that providers expand their efforts to build effective partnerships with the local business community, both as a means of countering disability stereotypes, and in order to ensure that youth with disabilities are not, once again, left behind in the labor market when recovery occurs. Encouraging local employers to invest in youth with disabilities by leveraging, for example, work-based learning experiences authorized under WIOA, offers one example of the opportunity for youth to access local labor markets, while acquiring the soft skills needed for career success (Luecking, 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

The findings of our study should be considered in the light of some limitations. We utilized a convenience sample drawn from five focus groups conducted in five locations—four of those were from the greater DC metro area, and one from a city in a neighboring state on the East Coast. Thus, concerns about representativeness of the sample and generalizability of findings arise; the experiences shared by the participants in our study may not be reflective of barriers and challenges faced by transition-age youth with disabilities in other settings or geographic areas. Future research should aim to

replicate the study by using a more representative sample. Second, although the focus group format worked well for us in general, it was hard to receive input from all participants for all questions since participants had varying levels of functioning and communication skills, with youth participants at two of the sites requiring on-site support personnel to assist by repeating questions or prompting youth on their responses. Thus, utilizing an individual interview in addition to the focus group interview would help increase participation for some youth as well as increase the scientific integrity of research. Third, the demographic question for education status for one site, and disability status for another site were accidentally omitted, resulting in missing data on those variables, that were not, however, significant to the research questions or analyses. Lastly, since we followed a predefined set of questions in our focus group interviews, and although participants in most sites were given opportunities to share their thoughts in the end, it is likely that we may have failed to capture all aspects of youths' experiences related to employment. Adopting a mixed method approach wherein data on the topic is collected via another approach (e.g., surveys/questionnaires) may help address this concern by capturing information that may have been missed by using just one approach (Greene, 2007).

Conclusions

Not with standing our limitations, our study makes several important contributions by identifying five major challenges transitioning youth with disabilities encounter in employment, several of which have been identified in other research with similar populations. Given these results, it is very clear that much work is required in preparing youth with disabilities as they transition into adulthood, where they have to deal with the typical developmental challenges of emerging adulthood, while negotiating the perceived and actual barriers to work. Efforts should be targeted at addressing the barriers highlighted in the study, such as the use of preemployment transition services authorized under WIOA, where vocational rehabilitation, secondary school, and community agencies can receive funds from state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies for career preparation activities, such as self-advocacy training, or work-based

learning experiences for students. These promising services have garnered significant support toward improving employment outcomes for students with disabilities who receive them (e.g., Mazzotti et al., 2015). Finally, transition professionals should consider expanding students' knowledge of the ADA by embedding information within secondary and postsecondary academic curricula.

NOTE

- 1 Demographic information on disability type for one site, and education for another site were not collected, and thus there is missing data for those variables.

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