

Post-school Transitions of Students with Disabilities: The Japanese Experience

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Abstract

This paper reviews the public policy and current practice regarding the transition services, supported employment, and supported education services for postsecondary students with disabilities in Japan. It considers ways in which the transition from school to employment can be improved for young people with disabilities.

Introduction

While more than 95% of Japanese university graduate students obtained employment in 2008, it is not the case for students with disabilities. One of the reasons is that only 3% of them obtained postsecondary education and 63% went to welfare facilities. Once they transfer to welfare facilities, 98% stay there without any employment. Japanese government has been struggling to reduce the institutionalization rate and increase the employment rate, using supported employment strategy. So far, with the help of job coaches and a recent “exempted subsidiary small company” system, it seems to have succeeded in reaching the mandatory employment rate of 1.8% for people with disabilities set out for private companies employing more than 56 employees. However, their wage is not at par with others’. They usually get the minimum wage of 703 Japanese yen per hour (about U.S. \$6), and many do not work full time. Their monthly wage is not enough to live independently; therefore they tend to live with their parents. For those with disabilities, obtaining postsecondary education is one of the surest ways to get a good job and to earn well above minimum wage.

One of the ways to increase their chances to go to university is the use of supported education. It is a university-based program mainly for students with mental health problems and psychiatric disabilities who wish to go to university and get a job upon graduation. However, many of these students and prospective students do not have sufficient support once they are on campus. Human resources for supported education are very limited, and many career support centres on campus do not provide supported education as a formal service. The purpose of this paper is to review the public policy regarding the transition services, supported employment, and supported education services for postsecondary students with disabilities in Japan. The paper will describe the background and the current practice. Discussion will include mutual support among co-workers and/or classmates and how we can modify the school and work environment.

Lifespan approach to transition

Transition involves moving from one context and set of interpersonal relationships to another. In today’s changing world, individuals make several transitions at home, in an educational context and at work (Jindal-Snape, 2010). Transitions take place throughout one’s life. A good transition will bring a better life. Since school to work transition occurs at an early stage of life, it is important to be successful earlier. Once you start working, it is a matter of how you retain the job, feel happy about the job, and keep yourself healthy on the job.

A lifespan developmental approach is based on a seamless transition support that connects home, school, work place and the community, regardless of the disability. It includes family counselling, school counselling, career counselling, community counselling, developmental counselling and rehabilitation counselling, to name a few.

In Japan, an application of the lifespan developmental approach has been acknowledged by various professionals such as counsellors, teachers, therapists and social workers. However, despite research documenting the importance of interagency collaboration (Neubert, Moon, & Grigal, 2004), these professionals do not always work together. Also, there is a shortage of transition coordinators. Furthermore, the current Japanese service structure makes it difficult to provide a seamless transition support, especially for individuals with disabilities.

Issues in service structure in Japan

Table 1 is a matrix showing by areas (education, work, and welfare) and legislation, governmental ministries, key service coordinators, direct service providers, and individual plans regarding transition from school to work practice for individuals with disabilities in Japan.

In this service delivery system, areas of work and welfare are administered by the same ministry, as its name suggests, the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. However, the area of education is administered by a separate ministry; the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. A good collaboration between the 2 ministries is a foundation for a smooth transition from school to work.

Table 1. Service system for transition from school to work for individuals with disabilities in Japan

	Law	Ministry	Coordinators	Providers	Plan
Education	School Education Act	Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology	Special Education Needs Coordinator	Teacher, School Counselor	Individual Education Plan
Work	Employment Promotion Law for Persons with Disabilities	Health, Labour, and Welfare	Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor	Job Coach	Individual Vocational Rehabilitation Plan
Welfare	Services and Supports for Persons with Disabilities Act	Health, Labour, and Welfare	Social Welfare Service Manager	Social Workers	Individual Support Plan

There are three coordinators as shown in the Table 1. They are special education needs coordinator, vocational rehabilitation counselor, and social welfare service manager. The three individual plans for education, work, and welfare are drawn and implemented separately by different coordinators. An individual plan itself should be completed within a certain time frame to achieve a goal. However, the goal or the outcome of each plan can be shared by those different coordinators. This is when the individual plan can be a communication tool for professional collaboration. Although there must be a linkage among the 3 individual plans, there is no legal requirement to connect them. There is no specification of service integration and professional responsibility for administering any type of transition.

Toward a service integration

One of the ideas to fill a void in the current service structure in Japan is to create a joint committee for Transition from School to Work, namely, TSW committee. The TSW may be represented by a special education needs coordinator, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, and a social welfare service manager. The TSW committee can share individual plans and come up with an integrated, sequential individual plan for a particular client throughout his/her lifespan development. Recently a taskforce for the coordination of education, labour and welfare has been created by the government and has gained some attention from the public. However, what has been missing in the discussion is the lack of real individual plans at the discussion table, and to come up with a realistic solution. An integrated service cannot be provided without inter-professional coordination. A TSW meeting can be held at a local human service agency on a regular basis, in order to come up with an effective integrated service. The meeting should monitor and evaluate the quality of the transition service.

The professional training of the three key coordinators has yet to be developed at graduate schools across Japan. Limited studies are available for identifying professional responsibilities for transition and collaboration (Yaeda, et al, 2000). Alternatively, similar to Scotland a key worker system can be adopted as suggested by the Beattie report which made recommendations for improving the transition, provision, employability and employment of vulnerable young people at risk of social exclusion. One important recommendation related to the involvement of key workers to support the young people throughout the transition from school to post-school learning or employment. The key feature of the key worker is to ensure that there is one consistent person supporting the young person through the transition process (Scottish Executive, 1999).

Issues in transition of students with disabilities

Currently, teachers at special education needs school in Japan are trying to raise the employment rate of their students after graduation.

Through an early intervention and an individual transition plan, with a help of job coaches or work supporters, there are some schools yielding more than 80% of employment rate. Yet, most of the schools are short of such personnel, and many teachers work extra hours trying to find employers and to help their students getting and retaining the employment. In 2007, the average of only 24% students with disabilities were employed after graduating from high school, compared to 98% students without disabilities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008a). Since many of individuals with disabilities did not get employed, they had to move to welfare facilities. In 2007, 63% of individuals with disabilities went to welfare facilities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008a). The problem is that once they transfer themselves to welfare facilities, 98% stay there without any employment (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2008b). This is why a smooth transition from school to work place and from welfare facility to work place becomes necessary.

Pursuing a higher education is another issue for students with disabilities. In 2007, only 3% students with disabilities went to universities, compared to 53% students without disabilities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008a). In 2008, there were 168 students with disabilities who went universities. Figure 1 shows the number of university students according to the type of disability (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008a). Students with visual impairment and hearing impairment were the highest among others. Only 4 students with intellectual disability were accepted. There is no data available for university students with psychiatric disabilities. It might mean that either there is no university student with psychiatric disability or s/he has not been identified. The following section deals with the issue of higher education for students with psychiatric disabilities.

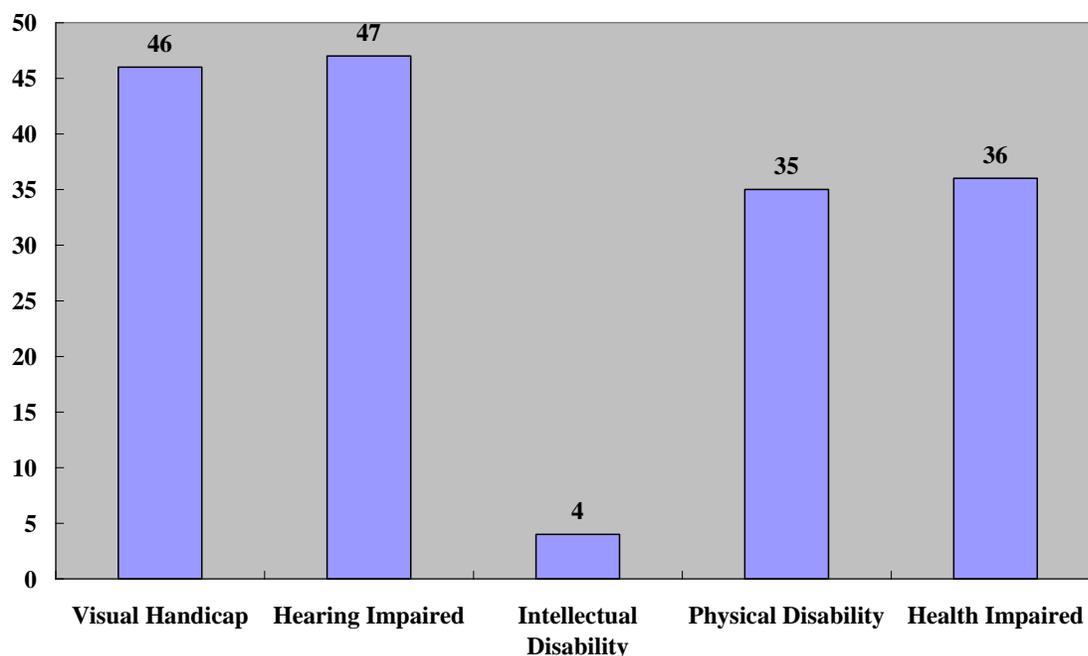


Figure 1. Number of new students with disabilities who went to universities in the academic year of 2008

Supported education for students with psychiatric disability

Supported education is a university-based service for students with psychiatric disabilities. With supported education, individuals with psychiatric disabilities have a choice to play the role of “students” instead of “patients”. They are helped by the supported employment specialists, mental health counselors, psychiatric social workers, career counselors, and student volunteers to prepare for a university, to go to university, to study in the classroom, to communicate with professors and students, and to lead an independent life. Through supported education, individuals with psychiatric disabilities have a better chance for improving their “self-esteem, social functioning, independence, cognitive abilities, and confidence” (Isenwater, Lanham, & Thornhill, 2002, p.43). Supported education has helped them “to find a sense of purpose and transition into other life roles” (Knis-Matthews, Bokara, DeMeo, Lepore & Mavus, 2007, p.110).

In Japan, relatively large universities have a Disability Student Service (DSS) center on campus. University of Tsukuba is one of them and has a substantial number of students with physical, hearing and visual impairment. There are some students with mental health problems who need additional academic support as well as daily living support. When that was the case, academic supervisors specializing in psychiatric rehabilitation would help them with a collaboration of career counselors at the Career Support Centre (CSC). They try to empower students with psychiatric disability by offering support at any time during the day. This gives a sense of relief and security to the student. The supported employment team can get other students involved. Although sometimes it takes more years to graduate from the university, students with psychiatric disabilities can complete academic requirements, pursue further career advancement, recovered and rehabilitated.

Supported education should work for students with psychiatric disability obtaining higher education and employment. Like supported employment, supported education is a normalization technique for individuals with severe disabilities whose rights to receive services have been deprived for a long time (Yaeda, 2009b). Supported employment uses job coaches or work supporters who train employees with disabilities on the job. In supported education, “school coaches”, “additional education supporters” or “supported education specialists” should be able to help students with psychiatric disability on campus. A seamless line of support from school to work is beneficial not only for students with disability, but also for every student on campus. Students majoring social work, counseling, special needs education and rehabilitation can be a natural source of support for supported education, get hands-on experience and learn from each other. The mental health counselors, psychiatric social workers, and supported education specialists as a team, could supervise such “student supporters”. For some students with psychiatric disability, student supporters may seem more natural source of support since classmates can be more friendly than professors and staff. Table 2 summarizes some ideas for providing better supported education.

Table 2. Ideas for providing better Supported Education (SEd)

(1) make a full-time equivalent SEd specialist available on campus
(2) train and utilize “student supporters” as a source of natural support
(3) use job coaches to transfer students with disabilities from school to work place

Keys to a better transition

There must be some steps or keys to a successful transition from school to work. A combination of supported education and supported employment is one way (Hutchinson, Anthony, Massaro, & Rogers, 2007; Nuechterlein, Subotnick, Turner, Ventura, Becker, & Drake, 2008). By systematizing such service integration, various professionals have no way but to work together as a team (Yaeda, 2008; 2009a). It is important to identify what transition strategy might work. Yaeda (2010) suggests some strategies that may work for a better transition as shown in Tables 3 and 4. However, as these are just conceptual framework, scientific evidence needs to be gathered (e.g., Applequist, Mears, & Loyless, 2009).

Table 3. Three strategies for better transition

(1) the sooner you start the transition planning, the better the outcome is
(2) the more focused on what they like, the better the job matches
(3) the better the job matches, the longer they keep the jobs

Table 4. Three ways for better transition practice

(1) give them a chance to try
(2) be creative as to how you can teach the essential vocational skills
(3) let them find their own ways to do the job

Issues in professional education

Quality assurance of any profession is fundamental for better practice. Training highly qualified professionals such as special education needs coordinators, vocational rehabilitation counselors and social welfare service managers has been an urgent issue.

For example, Inter-Professional Education (IPE) has started in several Japanese universities. Although the educational outcome is yet to be evaluated, the IPE concept harmonizes well with the current movement of collaboration by various disciplines in Japan.

In terms of pre-service training, a master’s program for training special education needs coordinators has started at the University of Tsukuba in 2008. Transition from school to work has become one of the core curricula.

In the same year, a new graduate program called “Lifespan Developmental Sciences” has also started at the same campus. The new curriculum combined the two master’s programs, the counseling sciences and the rehabilitation sciences. Together, they created a new doctoral program for the lifespan developmental sciences. Specifically, counseling sciences include family counseling, clinical counseling, school counseling, career counseling, community counseling and development counseling. Rehabilitation sciences include disability sciences, special needs education, rehabilitation medicine, rehabilitation counseling, vocational rehabilitation and social rehabilitation. The curriculum has been re-organized in order to meet the today’s educational needs of interdisciplinary professionals in human services.

Figure 2 presents how transition is disconnected among home, school and work place whereas Figure 3 shows how lifespan development expands without a disconnection. The Lifespan Developmental Sciences program at University of Tsukuba was developed based on this conceptual framework.

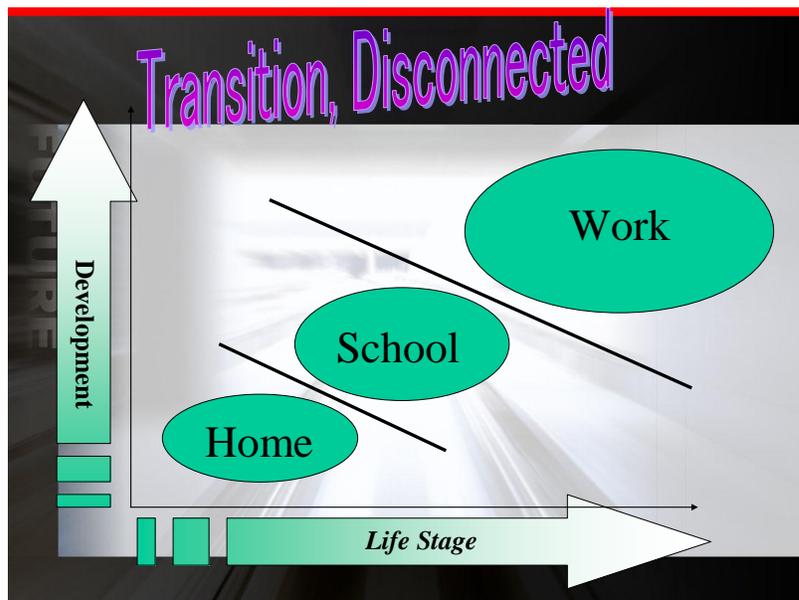


Figure 2. Disconnected transition among home, school and work

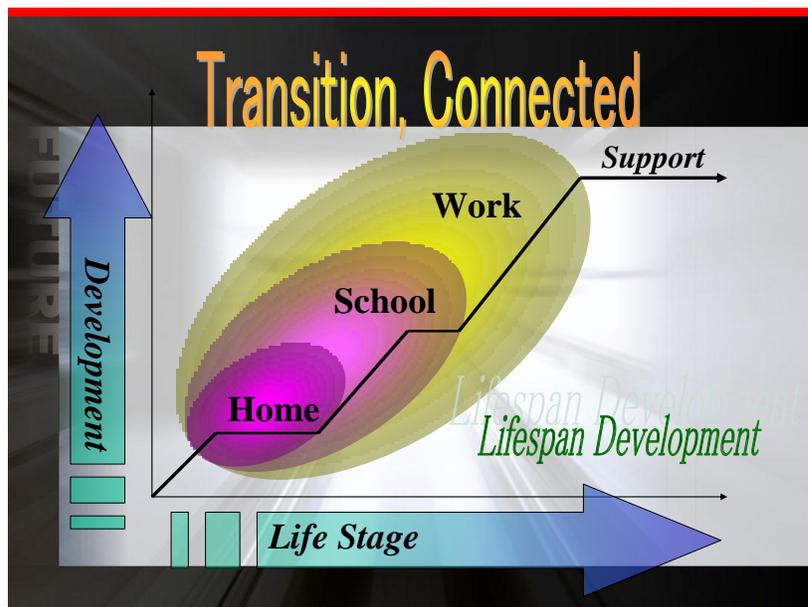


Figure 3. A conceptual framework of lifespan developmental sciences program at University of Tsukuba

Conclusion

It can be difficult to learn good work behavior. Developing vocational skills at an early age is critical, and they are best learned in a real work setting. Sustaining a good personal relationship is not easy for people with psychiatric disabilities unless there is a supportive environment. Supported education, supported employment, and lifespan development counseling are all good ingredients for successful transition from school to work for postsecondary school students with disabilities. A collaborative effort by the Lifespan Developmental Sciences program and the Institute of Special Education at the University of Tsukuba is expected to become an important step for both research and education of transition from school to work in Japan.

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