Employment experiences of youth with emotional and behavioral disorders: Perspectives of youth and their supervisors.


For youth moving into adulthood, meaningful paid employment is both an end in itself and a means of establishing genuine independence. For transition-age youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), finding and maintaining competitive employment can be extremely difficult. Chronic job instability, evidenced by high turnover and termination rates, is a significant challenge for adolescents and young adults with EBD. This study sought answers to several questions of central importance in understanding why maintaining employment is so challenging to these youth, and in designing transition programs and employment interventions that address those challenges. The questions are: 1) To what extent does the job performance of youth with EBD match the expectations of their work-site supervisors?; 2) Do ratings of these youths’ performance on key work behaviors differ between supervisors and youth themselves?; 3) Do ratings of the importance of these same work behaviors differ between youth with EBD and their supervisors/employers?; and 4) How satisfied are youth with EBD with certain aspects of their employment situation?

Method

Sample

Forty-seven matched pairs of employed adolescents and the adult responsible for their direct, on-the-job supervision participated in the study. Youth participants were recruited from special education classrooms at 11 high schools in a large urban school district; all met study criteria of a) current competitive employment in a community business of at least one month’s duration, b) enrollment in a part- or full-day classroom for students with EBD, and c) voluntary consent to participate. Adult participants met criteria of a) having worked with a youth participant in a supervisory position for at least one month and b) voluntary consent to participate. Youth were predominantly male (83%) and Caucasian (58.3%; 35.4% identified as African-American). A slight majority (52.1%) were juniors or seniors; about a third (31.9%) were currently taking medications; and 11% reported prior participation in school-sponsored employment training. While all students’ transition plans included employment as a post-school outcome, only 21% had IEP goals that specifically addressed employment skills or training, and none were receiving on-site job support from school or vocational rehabilitation staff. Sixty percent reported working 20 hours a week or less, while 15% worked 31 or more hours per week. Adult participants/supervisors ranged in age from 22 to 65 years; 64% were Caucasian, while 32% were African-American. Supervisors had been employed with their businesses an average of 6.9 years, had held supervisory positions an average of 4.7 years, and had supervised adolescent employees an average of 9 months. Employment sectors for most participants in the study included restaurants, groceries, and retail businesses; smaller numbers of youth were employed in office/clerical, warehouse, auto repair or other categories.

Instrument Design and Study Administration

The questionnaire designed for the study has four sections: participant information, employment skills performance, employment skills importance, and job satisfaction (only youth were asked to complete this final section). Standard demographic data and occupational information was solicited from both youth and their supervisors; youth were also asked to provide information about their work history and job-readiness training. Employment skills performance was measured by 50 items derived from a review of the literature on employment skills and expectations for individuals with developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disorders. Items covered domains of task-related social behaviors, nontask-related social behaviors, work performance behaviors, and general work behaviors. Fifty identical items made up the employment skills importance section of the instrument; for these items, participants were asked to rate how important each behavior was to job success at their unique job site. All responses...
were made on a five-point Likert type scale, with response categories ranging from “not at all important” (1) to “very important” (5). Youth ratings of job satisfaction were obtained using a 15-item scale covering multiple aspects of employment, including (among others) opportunities for job advancement, opportunity to use personal skills, and relationship to co-workers. Satisfaction ratings were made on a similar five-point scale.

Questionnaires were administered to youth individually, with most sections completed by the student using a laptop computer that simultaneously displayed and read aloud each item (only the first section, participant information, was collected through an interview). After a given youth had completed a questionnaire, his or her direct job supervisor was invited to complete a parallel questionnaire. Supervisors were not informed that their youth supervisees had a disability. Both adolescents and their supervisors were paid $5 for participating in the study.

Results (by Research Question)

To what extent does the job performance of youth with EBD match the expectations of their work-site supervisors? Significant differences were found between supervisors’ ratings of the importance of work behaviors and their perceptions of youths’ actual performance of those same behaviors; ratings of importance were substantially higher than ratings of performance across the four behavioral domains of task-related social behavior, non task-related social behavior, work performance, and general work behavior.

Addressing the question Do ratings of these youths’ performance on key work behaviors differ between supervisors and youth themselves?, this study found that youth rated themselves significantly higher across all four domains than their supervisors.

Analysis of both groups’ responses to the question Do ratings of the importance of these same work behaviors differ between youth with EBD and their supervisors/employers? found significant differences for two domains: task-related social behaviors and work performance behaviors. No significant differences were found in the non task-related social behaviors and general work behaviors domains.

How satisfied are youth with EBD with certain aspects of their employment situation? Regarding job satisfaction, youth reported moderate levels of satisfaction with all 15 aspects of their work, with relationship to co-workers and amount of responsibility receiving the highest average scores. Opportunities for job advancement and pay received the lowest average scores. Job satisfaction was significantly (and positively) correlated with hourly pay and with youths’ ratings of their own performance across all four domains of employment skills performance; that is, youth who were paid more and/or who saw themselves as doing well on the job were more satisfied.

Discussion and Implications

The findings that many youth with EBD may not be meeting the expectations of their immediate supervisors, and that their perceptions of their on-the-job performance are generally higher than those of the supervisors charged with evaluating their work, can help to explain some of the frustrations, barriers to advancement, and high turnover experienced by these youth. Youth employment outcomes may improve from direct instruction on how to identify and maintain acceptable work performance standards, as well as provision of secondary school programs that cultivate the skills most important to job success. Also, it is important to recognize that desired work behaviors vary among job sites; a means of identifying which skills (for an individual youth within a given employment setting) need to be targeted for intervention is necessary. A questionnaire like the one used in this study may serve this purpose. Finally, the study highlights the need for effective, but non-stigmatizing, support and training in employment settings.