

BACKGROUND

With an estimated 35% of people with disabilities employed nationally, there is a need to advocate for competitive employment opportunities for young adults leaving the supported, educational system (Migliore & Butterworth, 2008). Young adults with disabilities face employment decisions early on with familial values and educational supports at the forefront of their influences (Timmons, Hall, Bose, Wolfe, & Winsor, 2011). Research has shown that OTs are severely underrepresented as a resource for transitional planning with OTs providing only 20% of services in schools (Spencer, Emery, & Schneck, 2003). However, school-based therapists see the need for increased participation in transitional planning, but attribute their lack of involvement to decreased knowledge of the educations regarding the unique services OT is qualified to provide (Mankey, 2011). The OT framework includes supporting participation and inclusion of all members of society and therefore, is in the scope of practice to advocate for this population (AOTA, 2013).

With the implementation of an order of selection process in Nebraska due to allocations of funding, vocational rehabilitation services have been limited and left some children without necessary supports (Bellini & Royce-Davis, 1999). Despite funding concerns, Nebraska VR has provided strong and steady opportunities to participate in Project SEARCH. Outcomes of Project SEARCH sites have been shown to include significant improvements in specific job skills, social behaviors and placement in competitive employment (Müller & VanGilder, 2014). Westside Community Schools partner with Children's Hospital to provide a meaningful and educational setting for a Project SEARCH internship. Westside is unique in that nearly 47 out of 1,951 high school students were eligible for special education services past grade 12 between 2018-2019 (Westside Community Schools, 2019). With a steady population of students in need of transition services, it is an ideal population in which to learn from and advocate for.

FOCUSED QUESTION

How can OT advocate for their role in pre-employment and transition planning?



DETAILS

Transition services (ages 18-21) at Westside include participation in various community job sites, social skills training and home management tasks. Students in transition can apply to Project SEARCH if they will be graduating the next year. In partnership and preparation with Project SEARCH, VR provides pre-employment services by providing job exploration counseling, self-advocacy instruction, counseling of post-secondary training options, workplace readiness and work-based learning experiences. Another organization, ATP, Assistive Technology Partnership, makes technology recommendations for schools and workplaces. VR and ATP work with a school district to identify individuals who would benefit from Project SEARCH.

Project SEARCH is a national organization that partners with local businesses, school districts and VR to provide students in their last year of high school special education an opportunity for a year long supported internship. The students at Westside complete three internships across various hospital departments to learn job skills, foster interests and develop social skills with the goal of competitive, community employment at the end of their internships.

METHODS

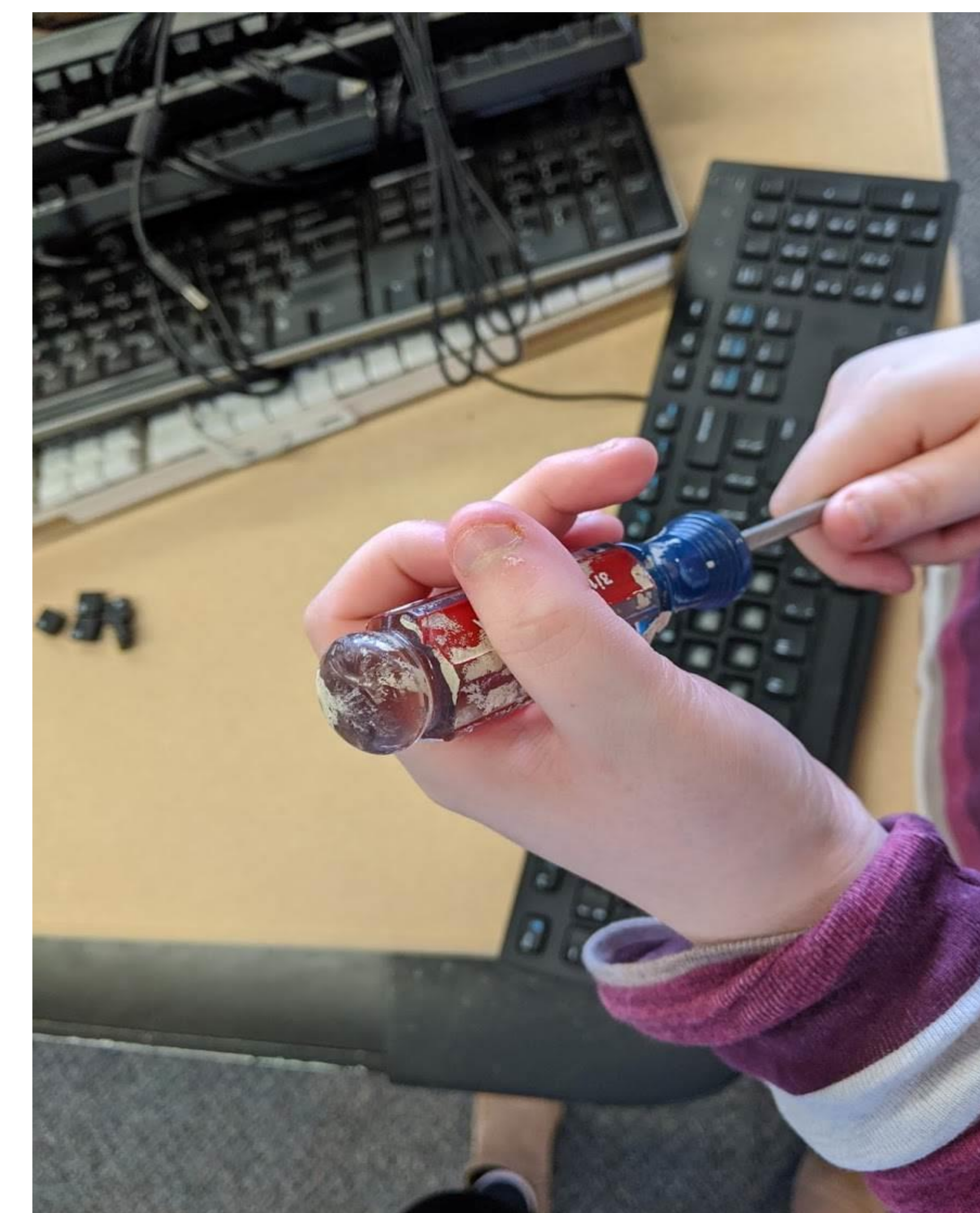
- Split time between Project SEARCH, VR, transition and Westside High School
- Project SEARCH
 - Hands-on job skills coaching to 11 students in different departments
 - Discussed behaviors and potential growth areas with educators and skills trainers
 - Participated in employment planning and IEP meetings
- Vocational rehab
 - Participated in meetings, advocacy activities and pre-employment transition planning
- Transition
 - Job skills training, ergonomic and workplace modifications
 - Provide communication link between transition and Project SEARCH to better prepare students to enter the internship
- OT at Westside High School
 - Learn school-based OT skills
 - Discuss ways to advocate for OT involvement in transition planning
 - Inform educators about knowledge and skill set OTs possess to increase involvement in transition planning

OUTCOMES

Findings from this rotation indicate a need for increased communication between relevant stakeholders in order to improve student services. Each organization plays a crucial role in skill development, however, an understanding of what expectations others place on students is important for success. I became a liaison for communication between all parties and advocated for early identification of student needs and initiation of transitional planning. I worked closely with a student to set up job site visits, develop interview skills, modify workplace behaviors and complete job applications. The student successfully completed the interview and onboarding process to gain meaningful, competitive employment.

With VR, I learned how to build on the services they provide by working with students in career exploration and task analysis. OT should advocate and work with students seeking employment to optimize long-term success.

Working with Educational Assistants within the transition program, I had the opportunity to problem solve job task requirements and behavioral regulation to improve work place interactions, behaviors and skill completion. For example, I suggested task modifications and repetition of new tasks to improve learning. Students in both settings improved in task performance at their various sites with a decreased need for verbal cuing while educators reported increased understanding on how to modify and grade tasks to optimize student motivation, success and learning.



BOTTOM LINE FOR OT

Implications from this capstone experience include insight into the distinct role OT can and should play in the transition process. Occupational therapists' unique skill set fully equips them to provide workplace modifications, in depth activity analysis as well as job, life and social skills trainings. OTs in school settings should not feel limited to participate in only traditional school practice but should instead be empowered to advocate for their role and contribute to transition planning and the IEP process.

It is of utmost importance to also realize what services were provided to a student in the past, what supports they currently have, what is available for their future and what their long-term vocational goals may be. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully consider and communicate with all stakeholders, including the students themselves, to perform a thorough evaluation of the student's skills and needs. OTs should feel as though they are an important member in transitional services and demonstrate their importance by making themselves available as a resource for educators, parents, students and VR. It is through collaboration and teamwork that students will achieve long-term vocational and life success.

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