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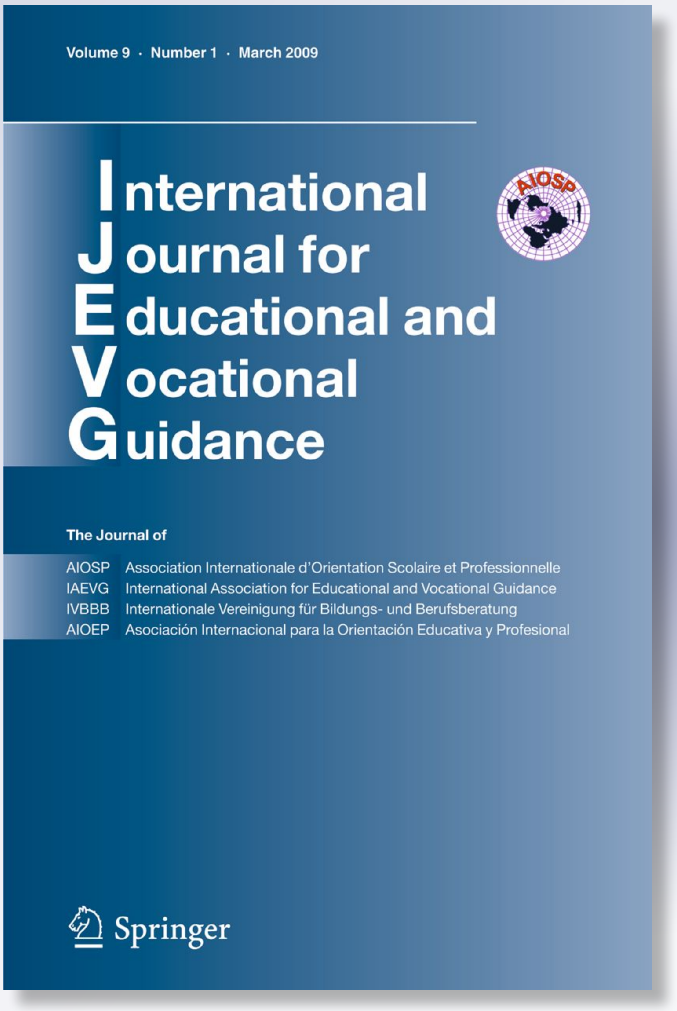

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Re-thinking support: the hidden school-to-work challenges for individuals with special needs

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Abstract This paper examines the hidden challenges experienced by individuals with special needs during the transition years between school and work. An assessment framework is proposed that covers domains of difficulties, developmental tasks during the transition years, the matrix of support within the home-community-institutions ecosystems, and the individual's personal profile of schooling experience, academic attainments, interests, aptitudes and sense of self-determination. The paper ends with a model for intervention addressing self-efficacy and the social cognitive environment of the individual.

Résumé. Re-penser le soutien: les défis cachés de la transition école-métier pour les individus ayant des besoins spécifiques. Cet article examine les difficultés cachées vécues par les individus ayant des besoins particuliers au cours des années de transition entre l'école et le monde du travail. Un cadre d'évaluation est proposé, celui-ci couvre les domaines de difficultés, les tâches dévelopementales pendant les années de transition, la matrice de soutien au sein des écosystèmes maison-communauté-institutions, ainsi que le profil personnel des expériences scolaires, les acquis académiques, les intérêts, les aptitudes et le sens de l'autodétermination. L'article se termine par un modèle d'intervention abordant les problèmes du sentiment de compétence et de l'environnement socio-cognitif de l'individu.

This article is based on case illustrations from India and presentations made at a symposium with the same name as this paper, presented at the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance-Jiva Conference held in Bangalore, India, October 8–10, 2010.

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Zusammenfassung. Überdenken von Unterstützung: Die versteckten Herausforderungen im Übergang von Schule in Beruf für Menschen mit besonderen Bedürfnissen. Dieser Aufsatz untersucht die versteckten Herausforderungen, welche von Personen mit besonderen Bedürfnissen während den Übergangsjahren zwischen Schule und Beruf erfahrenen. Ein Rahmenmodell zur Abklärung wird vorgeschlagen, welches die Bereiche Schwierigkeiten, Entwicklungsaufgaben in den Übergangjahren, die Matrix von Unterstützung innerhalb des Ökosystems Zuhause-Gemeinschaft-Institutionen sowie das persönliche Profil von Schulerfahrungen, akademische Errungenschaften, Interessen, Fähigkeiten und Gefühl der Selbstbestimmung umfasst. Der Aufsatz endet mit einem Interventions-Modell, welches Selbstwirksamkeitserwartung und das sozial-kognitive Umfeld des Individuums angeht.

Resumen. Replanteando los Apoyos: Retos "invisibles" en la transición de la escuela al trabajo para las personas con Necesidades Especiales. Este artículo explora los retos ocultos experimentados por personas con necesidades especiales durante los años de transición entre la escuela y el trabajo. Se propone un marco general de evaluación que contempla las áreas de dificultad, las tareas evolutivas durante los años de transición, la matriz de apoyo en los ecosistemas hogar-comunidad-instituciones y el perfil personal del individuo teniendo en cuenta su experiencia escolar previa, resultados académicos, intereses, aptitudes y sentido de auto-determinación. El artículo termina con un modelo para la intervención basado en la auto-eficacia y el ambiente cognitivo-social de la persona.

Keywords Disability · Career guidance · Self efficacy

Children with disabilities have unique needs. During the primary school years, when the focus is on literacy and learning, Special Educational Needs is the umbrella term used to refer to these unique needs. Special Educational Needs, or SEN for short, is the acknowledgement that children with disabilities have requirements that are distinct from the requirements of typically developing children. In many countries, SEN-related policies have provided the impetus for schools to move away from a single, one-shoe-fits-all curriculum to a more differentiated, tailor-made programme. Thus, the educational plan for a child with a physical disability may be only partially similar to a plan developed for a typically developing child. On the other hand, the plan may be wholly unique and different from plans that are developed for children with other disabilities. Such individualised educational plans have the greatest hold on educational practice in the primary school years. By secondary school, however, the force of their presence is much reduced, and visible mainly in two types of provisions: concessions related to taking examinations and concessions to drop a school subject or switch to a basic level course. These provisions seem, at least in part, to be motivated by an attempt to ensure that the milestone of a school-leaving examination is crossed by all enrolled children. Thus, starting from a broad, across-the-curriculum support in the early years, there appears to be a sharpening of focus on examination results at the time of exiting from the

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school system. It is against this backdrop that this paper reviews the challenges faced by young individuals with special needs during the transition years between school and further education and/or work, and proposes a framework for career counselling and livelihood planning for individuals with special needs.

Several groups of disabilities require the attention of career counsellors, including the physical disabilities and intellectual disabilities; hearing impairments, visual impairments, and, speech and language impairments; developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, and dyslexia; multiple disabilities; and, the collection of co-occurring symptoms that do not neatly fit a diagnostic category. Each type of disability may be seen to impact a primary domain, but may also extend into additional domains. Thus, for a child who is hearing impaired, the primary domain of difficulty is with receiving auditory information (hearing), but additional difficulties may be present in, for example, the language, social skills and emotional skills domains. Similarly, for a child with dyslexia, the primary domain of difficulty may be specific to reading and spelling, with additional difficulties in the domains of spoken language, memory, and planning. It is important to note that in all of these groups of difficulties, the special needs of childhood may persist into adolescence and adulthood. Some well-defined special needs, such as those stemming from a hearing impairment, may remain consistent over time. Other special needs, such as those associated with an attention deficit, may manifest with differing levels of severity over the course of development and across different contexts. In addition, new kinds of tasks during the adolescent and young adult years may give cause for new special needs to emerge. Many of the tasks during this life stage may be seen as normative and experienced by all young people. Preparing to take up occupational roles is one such normative task. There are other tasks that selectively draw attention to an individual's disability. Reading with accuracy, while easy for a typically developing school leaver, remains a task to be mastered for those who have fallen behind in reading development. We can expect that reasonable and comfortable solutions will be needed for both the normative tasks and the tasks associated with the individual's disability. We can also expect that if these tasks are left unattended, the consequences may not just be on career choice and livelihood planning but also on emotional wellbeing. The following sections will attempt to examine the sociocultural context in which support is made available to understand some key psychosocial issues that must be addressed in a career counselling and livelihood planning intervention for individuals with special needs.

The individual in context

The home-community-institution matrix

The community and more particularly self-help groups have played a major role in winning provisions for individuals with special needs (NHRC Disability Manual,

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2005). As advocates for the rights of the disabled, community and self-help groups have been intensely involved stakeholders in developing and sustaining interventions (e.g., the Indian nongovernmental organisation *Seva* in Action, 2010). There is often a sharpened sense of targets when set by self-help groups, and involving the community can make an intervention economical and less divorced from daily living. Indeed, it is likely that the sustainability of an institution-based service depends to a large extent on the quantum of acceptance that it can attract from within the community.

A career counselling and livelihood planning service needs to be alert to the dynamics that exist between home, community and institution-driven solutions. A home-grown solution such as protected employment within a small business set up by one's own family, may not offer continuity over time. A community-initiated solution, such as employment in a workshop for neighbourhood youth, may be driven by personalities. When the charismatic leaders leave, the support service withers away. An institutionalised solution may be rigid, unable to bend to the particular special needs of the individual. For example, in Section 2(t) of the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act of 1995 in India (published in 1996), a person with disability has been defined as "a person suffering from not less than forty per cent of any disability as certified by a medical authority" (p. 249). Such a biomedical definition limits access to institutionalised provisions for many individuals with special needs.

An assessment of the range of solutions available under the home-community-institution matrix places the individual in a social context and clarifies the opportunities available in the post-school years. Career counsellors would do well to acquire this evaluation skill.

Perhaps the most effective system of support for an individual with special needs is one that draws upon solutions generated by the home and the community as well as systems that have been formalised in the government and private sectors. The following case illustration from a South Indian nongovernmental organisation (NGO) demonstrates that a distance need not exist between informal and formal sources of support when planning a livelihood and career for an individual with special needs.

RM is an 18-year-old with multiple disabilities. He belongs to a neighbourhood workshop, set up and managed by his parents along with the parents of others like him. The workshop manufactures healthy multi-cereal meals. All meals are tested and certified for marketing by a government monitoring body. The workshop counts the Nutrition Department of a well-known hospital as one of its regular customers. RM has been assigned the job of managing the grinder in the workshop and his parents have informed him that the machine is a prototype that suits his needs as its operator. RM is happy to run a machine that can be operated from his wheelchair.

The push from enterprising parents, the banding together of a self-help group, and the use of institutionalised structures (in this case, a certification of the product), characterises the career opportunity available to RM within the matrix of his home, community and the institutions accessible to him. This kind of support from multiple sources has helped him to resolve one set of career development tasks. Other career and livelihood opportunities may have a very different set of

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connections between home, community and institutions, and may therefore offer different levels of resolution of career development needs. Understanding the matrix of support, therefore, becomes essential to plan activities in the school years that can prepare the child with special needs to experience a smooth transition into post-school opportunities.

School and attainment

Turning next to the school, there are a number of dimensions that need examining. This section will focus on three dimensions: the quality of SEN support, the profile of literacy attainments, and the nature of discontinuities between school courses and expectations in the world of work. A common belief is that schools are institutions that provide the instruction needed for developing skills and knowledge. The next case illustration from another Indian NGO makes plain that this may not always be the case.

MG is hearing impaired. She had been enrolled in a local school but dropped out in grade seven. Even though she struggled with class targets, she found herself in a higher class every passing year. She had not received any specialist help to ensure that she had learned what her peers so easily seemed to know. She was slow in reading, made many mistakes and soon could not understand school lessons. Now 18, MG works in a silk thread-making unit. This is a good employment opening since her home is in the lucrative silk belt of South India. Most importantly, she is relieved that in her new job there are no books to read!

The ways in which a school system responds to delays in attainments of grade-level targets have a direct bearing on the child with special needs. In India, for example, following from the Right to Education Act (2009), a seemingly friendly provision is available for all children in school. Section 16 of the Act states, "No child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till completion of elementary education" (p. 6). Many other countries have a similar policy. But as we can see from the experience of MG, the educational provision to promote children automatically to the next level is a double-edged sword. If the provision is not followed, children with special needs may be repeatedly penalised for not catching up with the expected class level. But if the provision is mechanically followed, a blind eye is turned to a child's slipping attainments. As a result, the highest grade that a child reaches may not be the level to which her skill and knowledge have developed. The hidden challenge then becomes one where, rather than being scaffolded by the skills and knowledge automatically associated with a school grade, the individual has a much diminished pool of personal resources. MG should have received more effective support to help her benefit more fully from a comprehensive education programme. Such support would have given her more options at the end of her school career. It is imperative that career counsellors include an assessment of the quality of assisted-learning support that has been provided for the individual. This kind of assessment would lead naturally to career counsellors being more informed about the reasons for each student's particular academic profile. A historical perspective would also ensure that career counsellors do not simply assume that all the difficulties currently manifest are

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automatically associated with the disability. A setback during the school-to-work transition years can be because of lack of earlier assisted-learning support rather than an automatic outcome of the disability. Further, a focus on the history of SEN support can become the foundation for career counsellors to negotiate with post-school services for "appropriate modification… to fit the learning style of the student" (Peterson & Housley, 1982, p. 10).

Apart from an assessment of the quality of specialist help available during the school years, there is good reason to include a comprehensive assessment of literacy attainments for all individuals with special needs. For example, a survey of reading attainments of secondary school children in the UK found unexpectedly large numbers of children struggling with reading (Stothard, Snowling, & Hulme, in preparation). Children in grades 7–11 (age range of 11–16 years) showed considerable variability in reading skills, with some children at reading ages below the grade 3 level (equivalent to the reading levels of 7-year-olds). Similar widespread delays in reading attainments have been reported in surveys of grade eight children (age 12) in India (Nag-Arulmani, 2005). One implication of the unsatisfactory attainments in secondary school is that many of these delays will persist into adulthood and affect the individual's career development. Poor readers are more likely to be employed in manual jobs and work roles with lesser complexity when compared to better readers (Banks & Roker, 1993; Ekstrom, Freeberg, & Rock, 1987). Poor readers are also more prone to being in unskilled, part-time jobs or being unemployed (Banks, 1992). A further twist in this tale is Stothard's (2010) observation that a substantial proportion of these poor readers were unknown to their schools. This finding rings a strident warning bell! Career counsellors must not automatically assume that all children with special needs have been identified in school. There may be many who are suffering but who may have slipped through unnoticed and as a result, remain unsupported. An assessment of current levels of literacy attainments can therefore identify hidden special educational needs.

A third aspect that creates challenges for the transition out of school is an overwhelming focus on examination-related accomplishments in the secondary school years. In India at least, much time and effort is spent managing the learning of school subjects. There is a narrowing of learning opportunities to prescribed textbooks and poor performance insidiously turns the individualised educational plan into a deficit-focussed educational plan. There may be a passing acknowledgement of the child's strengths in other areas, but these "extracurricular" accomplishments are implicitly devalued by the over-riding pressure to "pass the examination". When this happens, a more wholesome educational plan allowing for broader skills for learning and working is ignored. A direct consequence of this is not just the magnifying of initial disadvantages (Fuligni, Eccles, & Barber, 1995; Nag-Arulmani, 2005) but also a shaky entry into the world of work. Not surprisingly then, a fresh curriculum for employability and readiness for work becomes imperative to build the bridges between what the school offers and what the world of work expects (Raghavan, 2010). While experiences of fragmentation and discontinuities between school courses and post-school demands are perhaps true for many typically developing children as well (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004;

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Evans & Heinz, 1994), it is particularly true for children with special needs (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997). An effective career counselling and livelihood planning intervention must actively assess the nature of discontinuities between school and the next stage of study/employment.

Attitudes to personal interests, aptitudes and self-determination

Many individuals and their families show a philosophical acceptance of the services available (and not available) to support special needs. Their forbearance brings a grace and stoicism on what can be an exceptionally isolating experience. But a not-so-distant cousin of forbearance is passivity. Individuals may be trapped in a circle of passivity, lethargic to explore further targets and wider goals. Commenting on blocks to successful career development, Raghavan (2010) rated the subtle ways by which dependence is perpetuated as hidden yet pervasive. Elsewhere we have referred to patterns of thought in networks that surround an individual as a social cognitive environment (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). RM from the parent-group-managed work setting presented above, may be described as belonging to a social cognitive environment with an orientation to goals for him and others like him. The career beliefs appear to be towards developing proficiency. But there may be other social cognitive environments where there is a shutting off of aspirations because of the presence of special needs. When this happens, the individual and the significant others may themselves become barriers to career development and livelihood planning. The next case illustration from a special school in India captures the silent erosion of aspiration and the numbing inertia that can seep into the lives of individuals with special needs during the adolescent and young adult years.

Seventeen-year-old SM was diagnosed with low vision at the age of three which led to her joining a special school. Her primary domain of difficulty was with vision, and she had additional difficulties with reading, writing, and social skills. At the age of 12, she began a pre-vocational course that trained her to make paper envelopes. She has remained in the programme ever since, spending many hours of the day alone, making these envelopes. SM's parents say that she rarely receives feedback on her work. Both SM's teachers and her parents look uncertain when asked to describe her talents. They have not thought too much about her interests and aptitudes nor have they considered how this information can inform them in preparing SM to begin earning her livelihood.

Envelope-making appears to have been offered to fill SM's time and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that rather than being offered a rigorously tailored skill training programme, her foundational years have simply been wasted. There appears to be no serious intention to provide her with transferable skills that can lead to employment within today's market conditions. Even more importantly, the personhood of the individual is completely ignored. The spirit of self-determination is left diminished. There is little opportunity to build the individual's knowledge about him or herself, or about personal interests and aptitudes. Thus, there is a complete neglect of facilitating self-understanding which is the brick and mortar of person-centred career decision-making and livelihood planning. Worryingly, for

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individuals like SM, the circles of passivity need not stay limited to school services. Professionals associated with the transition years (such as placement officers and case workers) may also have a functional, mechanistic approach. They may ignore discussions about personal aspirations and goal orientations, and limit their support to stereotypic provisions for individuals with special needs. Career counsellors are ideally placed to break into such a circle of negativity to examine the career beliefs that drive provisions. They can help to nurture and boost the aspirations of individuals with special needs. It is therefore essential for career counsellors to doubly ensure that the personhood of the individual is placed at the core of the counselling and planning process.

Re-thinking support

The transitions from school to a fully fledged work life can be challenging for anyone. When the individual concerned has special needs, many of the challenges, though sharply experienced, can remain hidden and thus unaddressed. Three contexts were examined to uncover some of the hidden challenges faced by the individual with special needs. These three contexts were the home-community-institution ecosystem, the school, and the life experiences that shape one's orientation to career development tasks. It is clear that a complex collection of processes accompanies the transition from school to work. Therefore, there are several areas in which a career counsellor needs to gain expertise and sensitivity if counselling is to address the whole person and not just focus on his or her special needs.

A framework for assessment

An important area of expertise is to articulate a framework for assessment that ensures sensitivity both to the individual and the context. The foregoing discussion has highlighted at least five dimensions. The first dimension would be identifying the primary and additional domains of difficulties for the individual. The second dimension would be identifying the challenges of normative, life-stage related tasks and those linked to the domains of difficulties specific to the individual. The potential for generating solutions in the home, the community and the institutional matrix of the individual is the third dimension. An essential fourth dimension relates to schooling experiences including an analysis of the provisions offered (or neglected) in school, the quality of teaching and opportunity, the current levels of academic attainments, and the discontinuities between school and the world of work. Among these school-related details, a reading comprehension assessment is particularly essential for understanding the type of course and job-related textual demands that the individual can cope with. A final dimension of analysis focuses on the ways in which the social cognitive environment has psychologically prepared the individual with special needs for the uncertainties and other challenges in the world of work: This relates to understanding the level of knowledge about personal

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strengths and weaknesses along with the profile of interests and aptitudes, aspirations, and the individual's sense of self-determination.

A model for intervention

The discussion above focused on a multi-dimensional assessment framework. The next step is to re-think the support offered to the individual. For this, a framework which is based on the Career Preparation Process Model (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004) is proposed. This framework was first developed based on a series of surveys and interviews in India of young people with no known special needs. Figure 1 gives a summary illustration of the model adapted in this paper for individuals with special needs. The model builds on social learning theories (Bandura, 1986) to describe the process of preparation from school to further education and/or entry into the world of work.

According to this model, children enter the transition years with strengths and liabilities that have been shaped by their experiences in their own social cognitive environments. Thus, they may be strengthened (or weakened) by the quality of their accomplishments, the role models in their life, the verbal persuasion that they receive, and their anxieties and negative emotions about particular activities. These experiences shape their sense of efficacy for facing specific career development tasks. Examples of a career development task related to self-understanding would be an individual discovering his or her profile of strengths and liabilities. An example of a career development task related to knowledge about the world of work would be finding out about courses and programmes that lead to a particular cluster of skills and some specific area of knowledge. The two following case illustrations highlight the multiple ways in which activities in school and beyond can support the career preparation process.

AY is a 19-year-old with dyslexia. In school he struggled with reading, which remains his primary domain of difficulty. His parents supplemented school inputs with evening classes, but also ensured that he continued with extracurricular activities. A turning point in his life was a successful summer course in public speaking. Even though he struggled with the school-leaving examinations, his aspirations were clear, namely, after school he would study to become a front office manager. He went on to join an undergraduate course in management, enrolled in more public speaking courses, and worked as a volunteer in the business ventures of family friends. In effect, AY's family has given him a step-wise introduction to the world of work, a support that many children with special needs miss out on.

At 12, JR had overcome the worst of the behavioural symptoms of hyperactivity. What remained with him were moderate levels of attention deficit which disrupted performance on all types of tasks. He struggled with planning and managing a schedule. He also struggled with class lectures, instructions given by teachers, and any activity that required concentrating on auditory information. His performance improved when information was written, or presented in pictures. He gradually began to recognise that this was his area of strength. His parents taught him basic typing skills so that he could use a computer with ease. He signed up for a children's

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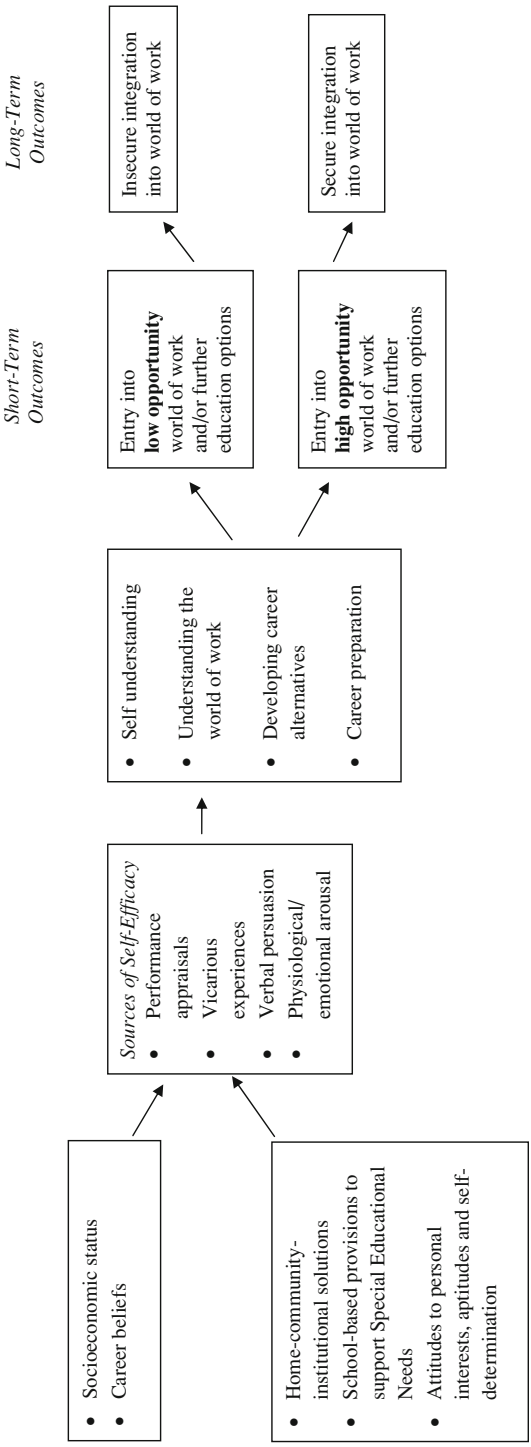

Fig. 1 The Career Preparation Process Model adapted for individuals with special needs (based on Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004)

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camp where he would learn to use design software in the morning sessions and work as a teacher assistant in the afternoon sessions.

The experiences of manager aspirant AY and summer camp volunteer JR stand in contrast to the experiences of thread-maker MG and envelope-maker SM introduced earlier in this paper. JR, unlike SM, has grown up in a social cognitive environment that has offered a variety of opportunities for experiencing performance accomplishments which, in turn, fostered the experience of positive emotions associated with such accomplishments. All this together would build JR's self-efficacy. Reading the journals maintained by individuals with special needs who had successfully entered a university level course, Webster (2004) found that opportunities that allowed students to explore boundaries, best supported the challenges of transition. JR's experiences allowed for such exploration, bringing with it performance accomplishments and opportunities for positive verbal persuasion by different adults. SM's social cognitive environment did not offer such opportunities to help expand her boundaries, leaving her with few performance accomplishments to boost her self-efficacy for career development tasks.

On comparing manager aspirant AY to thread-maker MG, it becomes clear that while the process of career preparation for AY was interspersed with several experiences that can promote his sense of efficacy about specific work-related tasks, MG had fewer opportunities to deepen her sense of efficacy for her selection of work-related tasks. In fact, MG appears to have found her work tasks useful because silk thread-making draws less from her specific domains of difficulty when compared to reading in school. Unfortunately, however, this seemingly convenient activity has left her with drastically reduced possibilities for skill building. Individuals with special needs can slip into making choices that are prompted by a wish to avoid rather than engage with the choice-making process. The former is a negative career choice-making process and the latter portrays a constructive choice-making process. A career counselling and livelihood planning programme for individuals like MG and SM, can draw ideas from the life histories of individuals like AY and JR.

Concluding comments

A final issue that needs highlighting is that not only does the social cognitive environment shape the individual's sense of efficacy, but the individual's level of self-efficacy can reciprocally shape the sources of efficacy-building experiences that become available. Thus, positive self-efficacy would be accompanied with a lessened degree of negative emotions about the task of career preparation. This in turn would attract effective performance accomplishment experiences, which along with verbal persuasion would support resolution of career developmental tasks. Career counsellors could intervene such that opportunities for performance accomplishments are created along with constructive verbal persuasion for individuals with special needs. This would contribute to positive emotional experiences leading ultimately to higher levels of self-efficacy to engage with career development tasks.

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The study of school-to-work transition has attracted the criticism of being atheoretical (Arulmani, 2000; Blustein, Juntunen, & Worthington, 2000). This paper has attempted to first bring to light some of the hidden challenges for individuals with special needs during the school-to-work years. It has then drawn up a theoretically motivated framework for career counselling and livelihood planning for the individual in context. The paper gains special significance as the Biwako Millennium Framework for Persons with Disabilities draws to an end in 2012 (Biwako Millennium Framework, 2002). Even after two decades of commitment to promote a rights-based society for people with disability through a Millennium Framework, much further action is still needed to ensure that individuals with special needs experience an inclusive and barrier-free entry into the world of work. Career counsellors can be key players in achieving this aim by actively re-thinking their support for individuals with special needs.

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