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Helping underserved leaders transition: a school based pre-vocational skills program

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Doctoral Project

**HELPING UNDERSERVED LEADERS TRANSITION:
A SCHOOL BASED PRE-VOCATIONAL SKILLS PROGRAM**

by

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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to adulthood is typically accompanied by student's prepping and planning for post-secondary education and employment following the completion of their education. Obtaining employment is a key milestone in a young adult's life and provides the opportunity for earning money, living independently, and actively participating within the community and work environment. Young adults with disabilities (YADs) face numerous barriers when attempting to prepare for and obtain employment. Barriers such as transportation, employer bias, and an individual's interpersonal factors contribute to poorer employment outcomes for YADs when compared to neurotypical same aged peers.

Helping Underserved Leaders Transition (HULT) is a school based pre-vocational skills program developed to address poor employment outcomes for YADs. Utilizing a mixed methods research design, *HULT* derives both qualitative and quantitative data from each program stakeholder including the students, their families and/or caregivers, and the school district administrators assisting with the logistics of the program implementation. Using quantitative data measures such as the use of Likert scales, *HULT* analyzes several outcomes before and after program participation related to

the students' skills in areas such as level of self-esteem, level of independence while completing vocational tasks, and ability to utilize coping strategies.

Pre-vocational training within a school setting provides a dynamic and unique addition to YADs educational experience. *HULT* in conjunction with community resources and school curriculum allows students to prepare for their future employment endeavors earlier and within an inclusive, client centered environment. *HULT* demonstrate the importance of pre-vocational skills programming earlier in a student's education to ensure accessibility and to improve overall employability for YADs.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Widening Gap

YADs have low employment rates compared to other groups due to the unique challenges these individuals face during their transition to adulthood (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). There are several factors that play a role in the discrepancy between the two groups, including lack of inclusion, lack of accessibility, and lack of vocational training for YADs.

In Michigan, several programs offer employment opportunities and assistance to families who are interested in their young adult obtaining employment following completion of high school and post-secondary education. An example of such a program is the Michigan Career and Technical Institute which provides an immersive educational experience for students to prepare for their chosen career path (Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, 2023).

To improve accessibility to these programs and begin skills training earlier, the authors proposed intervention will begin in high school, rather than waiting until students are enrolled within a post-secondary education program. Individuals with disabilities deserve accessibility to work opportunities that can allow them financial freedom, independence, responsibility and overall improved quality of life.

Addressing the Gap

The authors' proposed program is a school based pre-vocational skills training program. *HULT* aims to improve vocational skills performance in young adults with disabilities who receive direct Occupational Therapy (OT) services within a school based

setting. The program is designed to be easily integrated within a variety of school contexts with a focus on targeting vocational tasks related to preparing for interviews, identifying workplace coping skills, improving self-esteem and practicing work skills in a mock grocery store and school coffee shop. The purpose of this program is to establish vocational skills that can be generalized across several different work contexts and to prepare students for employment endeavors following completion of high school.

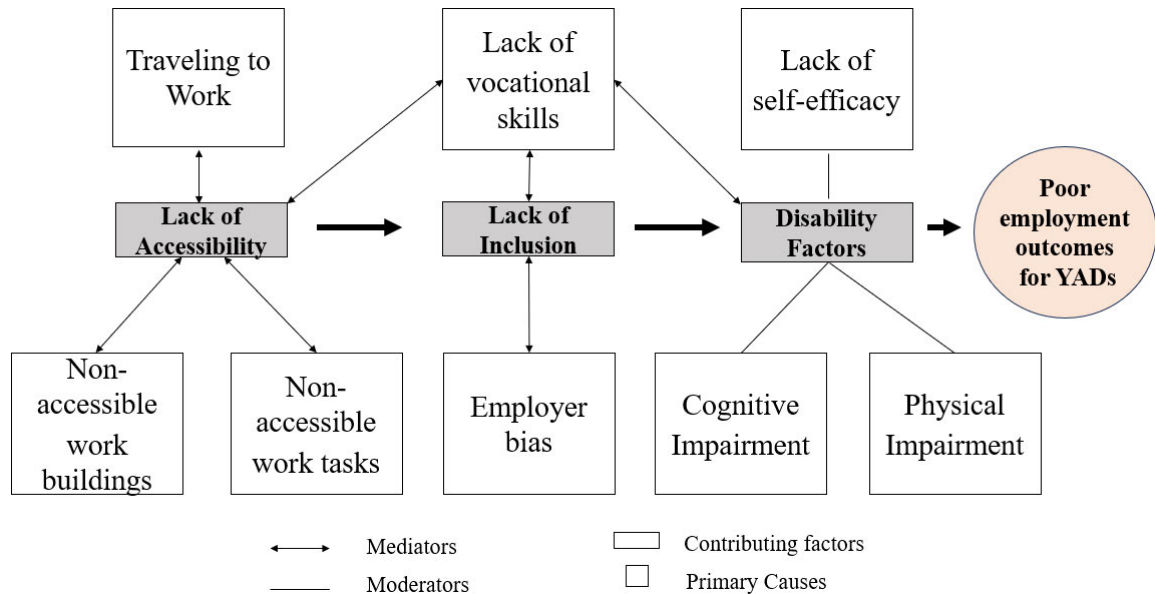
The hands-on activities outlined in the program can be graded depending on the client's specific disability and personal strengths to provide an optimal learning experience. Students will have the opportunity to a comprehensive, easily accessible program that addresses the unique needs of young adults with disabilities, leading to an overall improvement in employment rates for this group.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Evidence Base to Support the Proposed Project

Nature of the Problem

The three main primary causes leading to poor employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities are lack of inclusion, lack of accessibility, and the individual's specific disability factors. These three causes have been identified as having a substantial impact on employment outcomes at both the systemic and personal level; depicted in Figure 2.1 as the *primary causes*. The primary causes are moderated and mediated by a variety of factors; depicted in Figure 2.1 as the *contributing factors*. Mediators demonstrate a cause-and-effect relationship between two variables. Moderators demonstrate the influence of these causes and how much they may be impacting the primary causes.

The Explanatory Model (Figure 2.1) below was developed utilizing current literature and identifies the primary causes of poor employment rates; detailing the impact of the mediating and moderating factors. Figure 2.1 depicts mediators as double-sided arrows to represent the transactional relationship between the primary causes and contributing factors. Moderators are depicted as the line segments, representing the impact the primary causes have on the contributing factors.

Figure 2.1*Explanatory Model***Current Evidence**

Regarding lack of accessibility to employment or pre-vocational opportunities, Bal et al., (2021) found that low self-esteem and traveling to work were associated with low employment rates among adults with disabilities. Figure 2.1 depicts traveling to work as a factor that mediates lack of accessibility. Individuals may be unable to drive due to their disability, there may be limited accessibility to public transportation, or individuals may have difficulty navigating public transportation. Work tasks without reasonable accommodations or inaccessible work locations impact young adults' abilities to access work opportunities. When developing a pre-vocational skills program, Bal et al., (2021) provided intervention related to determining accessible working accommodations for individuals seeking employment opportunities. Limited access to transportation, non-

accessible work environments, and non-accessible working conditions are all factors that mediate lack of accessibility.

Lack of inclusion is mediated by employer bias and the individual's level of independence with vocational skills as depicted in Figure 2.1. Employer biases contribute to poor employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities. According to a scoping review by Iwanaga et al., (2021), employers' adherence to hire individuals with disabilities varies depending on whether the individual's disability is physical, cognitive, or mental health related. Rodriguez et al., (2020) found employers may be more likely to hire individuals with physical disabilities and may have misconceptions about disabilities impacting individuals' cognitive skills. An individual's disability factors lead to misjudgment from employers as well as impacting their ability to perform vocational tasks effectively. Figure 2.1 outlines lack of inclusion as a mediator of poor vocational skills, emphasizing the impact biases and lack of disability related knowledge has on YADs. Vocational skills in YADs are mediated by disability factors as noted in Figure 2.1.

Self-efficacy, cognitive impairments, and physical impairments are all contributing factors that moderate an individual's disability factors as depicted in Figure 2.1. Self-efficacy can be impacted by an individual's specific disability factors. Several studies have highlighted the importance of addressing self-efficacy when working with young adults who have disabilities in a vocational setting. According to Andersen et al., (2018), self-efficacy levels are a major contributing factor to whether an individual has successful employment or not. These results are echoed by Meyer et al., (2019) in a study that

focused on individuals in “emerging adulthood” and the outcomes associated with poor employment rates. The study found that the main predictors for resilience in the workplace are overall life satisfaction and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy moderates’ disability factors as individuals have a certain level of self-esteem. Self-efficacy is a factor that has a negative impact on young adults with disabilities and their ability to obtain and maintain employment (Lindsay et al., 2019).

Rast et al., (2020) conducted a study that revealed how the type of disability may affect employment opportunities. The study used data analyses to determine the difference in employment rates among young adults with autism compared to young adults with physical disabilities, and other types of disabilities. It was concluded that participation in a post-secondary education through vocational rehabilitation programs can improve employment rates for young adults with autism, highlighting how individuals with Autism are under-utilizing these programs when compared to other individuals with disabilities. Individuals' type of disability and their level of self-efficacy can impact their employability. Figure 2.1 demonstrates the relationship between self-efficacy, cognitive impairment, and physical impairment as factors that moderate an individual's disability factors and overall employment skills.

Theoretical Evidence

The main theory referenced while creating this program is the Social Cognitive Theory. The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was developed by Albert Bandura to address and understand the cognitive processes that occur during observational learning and is unique in its theoretical hypothesis that the environment can shape behavior, (iSALT

Team, 2014). SCT emphasizes the importance of observational learning and role modeling, while also addressing intrinsic factors such as self-efficacy, (Boston University School of Public Health, 2019). The four mediational processes that Bandura hypothesized to occur during observational learning are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, (McLeod, 2016). These four processes relate to how well the behavior is attended to, how well it is remembered, the ability to recreate desired behavior, and the motivation behind doing so. Bandura also hypothesized that it is important to also address a person's history and past experiences to understand current behavior and the person's perceived consequences based on their lived experience. SCT guides the *HULT* program by promoting the importance of social and observational learning in conjunction with intervention targeting self-esteem among other psychosocial work skills.

During the *HULT* program, participants have the opportunity to work amongst groups, practice various vocational tasks, identify work related coping skills, and observe mock interview sessions. One study utilized a social cognitive approach as its basis to address vocational training needs of transition age students in a school system setting, demonstrating positive outcomes related to readiness for employment (Chiang & Howe, 2021). The *HULT* program intervention components are rooted in observational learning and role modeling through interaction with multi-modal task materials and activities.

SCT focuses on the transactional relationship between an individual's thoughts, feelings and behavior, (Boston University School of Public Health, 2019). Through utilization of the theory, the *HULT* program was developed to assist students identify ways to improve their self-esteem related to future employment, institute coping

strategies that may be beneficial within the workplace, identify work interests, and practice hands-on employment skills.

YADs experience difficulty with obtaining employment due to lack of inclusion, accessibility, and an individual's specific disability factors. Previously conducted studies, current research, and relevant literature identify these factors and provide proposed solutions, continued data collection, and dissemination of results to provide a base of knowledge for future studies. This information has been utilized to develop Figure 2.1 guiding the *HULT* program. The theoretical framework presented in this chapter provides *HULT* with guidance for intervention components by utilizing the concepts outlined in SCT.

Chapter 3: Overview of Current Approaches and Methods

Current Approaches

The purpose of synthesizing current literature was to determine what vocational program interventions are beneficial in supporting positive employment outcomes for YADs. It was also beneficial to contrive the unsuccessful components. The *HULT* program was developed following a synthesis of outcomes from similar programs, evidence in the OT literature, and evidence from related practice areas.

Occupational Therapy Approaches

Occupational Therapy Practitioners (OTPs) practice is guided by the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF). The OTPF outlines various areas of occupation, client factors, and other components that apply when supporting our clients to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. According to the OTPF, work is an integral occupation that relates to identifying meaningful employment goals, seeking employment, job performance, and other related vocational concepts (AOTA, 2020). As important as employment is in the lives of our clients, individuals with disabilities face several barriers related to obtaining, accessing, and excelling in employment endeavors.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) provides educational resources via an online platform for OTPs in America to access in an effort to improve service delivery, establish competency, and to stay updated on current trends and research. AOTA provides a document that outlines the importance of transition services amidst a post-pandemic world, stating that employment outcomes for YADs can be improved through the implementation of school-based vocational programs in

conjunction with community resources after high school to assist with the transition to employment (Carrasquillo & Gerken, 2021).

AOTA (2020) emphasizes the importance of transition planning as an integral component to use during the OT process. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) outlines the four content areas to be considered to determine how to assess YADs and their readiness for transition to adulthood after high school (Carrasquillo & Gerken, 2021). The four components include community participation, post-secondary education, independent living, and employment. It is required that transition planning services begin at sixteen years of age. This is an important implication for OTPs to be aware of, as OTPs working in a school-based setting need to be vigilant in preparing students for successful transition outcomes following high school graduation.

Programs in Michigan

The *HULT* program is to be implemented within a school district in Michigan. Therefore, evaluation of relevant programming and services in Michigan was warranted to determine how local and state level programs assist or hinder in the implementation of a school based pre-vocational program for YADs. Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) and Michigan Transition Services Association are two organizations that assist YADs through the transition to employment after graduating from high school. MRS focuses on establishing 1:1 relationships with students and their families, utilizing rehabilitation counselors and programming including resume building, job placements, and other support services (*Customer Guide to Continuing Education and Training After High School*, 2011) Conversely, Michigan Transition Services Association (2021) is an

organization that provides education, conferences, and support to professionals who work within the transition process such as teachers, OTPs, and other allied professionals. This organization takes the focus off directly supporting YAD, but rather supporting the individuals who work with YAD every day.

Michigan Career and Technical Institute (MCTI) and the Western Wayne Skills Center are two post-secondary institutions that focus on developing vocational skills for YAD in Michigan (MCTI, 2022 & Garfield Community School, 2022). Both programs include developing skills related to culinary arts, clerical skills, custodial services, retail, commercial printing among other disciplines. One main difference between MCTI and the Western Wayne Skills Center is that MCTI is organized similarly to a college campus. Students stay in dormitories on campus, where they develop life skills needed to live independently as well as participate in vocational training.

MCTI includes a CNA program, training to become a pharmacy technician, and working with machinery such as automobiles. The Western Wayne Skills Center is located within a school district in Michigan, and programming includes both vocational skills training and related life skills classes to develop independence for the students as they move forward in adulthood. The Life Enrichment Academy (2022) is also a post-secondary vocational skills program, but it differs from the previously discussed organizations due to its focus on community integration for not only YAD, but for individuals with severe mental illnesses as well. The services provided by the organization include job placements, job coaching, and vocational skills training at a variety of unique locations including fitness centers, salons, horseback riding locations,

as well as providing daily recreational activities to all participants in an effort to provide community integration support.

There are programs in Michigan designed to be implemented to benefit high school students and to assist professionals in providing appropriate and effective transition services. Project Search and the Michigan Merit Curriculum assist in developing client-centered vocational outcomes for students within high schools who are ready to begin the transition planning process. Project Search (n.d.) is implemented in the students' last year of high school and includes internships as well as a family centered approach working with both the students, their families, and related support staff such as the teacher and a counselor from MRS. The Michigan Merit Curriculum allows modifications to students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP) to determine which classes are needed to earn a high school diploma, as well as assisting to determine appropriate transition planning. Programs such as these are important within the school-based OT setting because they provide transition planning services to YADs and their families as well as developing transition plans based on the students' goals and skills.

The pre-vocational opportunities discussed above are similar in their approach to providing multidisciplinary experiences to aid in development of vocational skills and assist throughout the transition from high school to employment. Various components of each program are individualized based on the program's goals, resources, and anticipated outcomes. Pre-vocational opportunities within a high school OT setting allows for direct intervention in work skills, not only assisting with the employment process in its entirety. The *HULT* program was developed in acknowledgment of existing Michigan based

programs and services, aiming to serve as an ancillary program that can assist students throughout their transition to employment.

Relevant Evidence

In an effort to ensure effectiveness of the *HULT* program, a literature review was conducted to determine which aspects of pre-vocational programs are successful based on previous program results. Previous studies have addressed the problem of poor employment outcomes for YADs through various interventions and perspectives. A unique component of the proposed program is that it can be used to address several different employment related skills for individuals with various disabilities, strengths, and career aspirations, utilizing current literature to extrapolate the most successful intervention components and considerations.

The “At Work” vocational rehabilitation program used group sessions and individual job coaching to improve employment rates for young adults with physical disabilities, (Bal et al., 2021). The intervention consisted of group sessions due the ability of participants to learn through observational learning and modeling by gaining peer support. The topics discussed included self-efficacy, workplace accommodations and modifications, and applying for employment. The rates of paid employment increased following the study, demonstrating improvement in the participants ability to obtain and maintain satisfactory employment. This study was utilized to inform the module components in the *HULT* program including learning how to look for a job, utilizing group interventions, and focusing on self-efficacy development.

One study aimed to illuminate the importance of participation in postsecondary education and vocational rehabilitation programs for improving employment benefits (Rast, 2020). The study presented the importance of vocational rehabilitation programs for young adults with autism; showing better employment outcomes for those who have received postsecondary education through vocational rehabilitation when compared to those with less formal education. A study conducted in Florida was conducted to determine the effectiveness of a post-secondary educational program for young adults with intellectual disabilities (Agarwal et al., 2021). The study determined several program components that are important to the success of the students including job shadowing, role playing job interviews and resume development. This study was utilized to inform the module components in the *HULT* program including the use of mock interviews and resume development.

Parent and family interviews from previous studies have noted the importance of transportation to vocational programs, earlier transition plans, and student-centered goals as important and meaningful components related to YADs and their participation in vocational programs (Jacobs et al., 2018). Creating a vocational program within high schools aims to alleviate transportation concerns as transportation is provided to these students and they can complete portions of the program throughout their school day as a part of their OT intervention.

As stated, families and parents related to students with disabilities note the importance of family involvement throughout the process of developing vocational skills, (Disability Rights Michigan, 2022). During the *HULT* program, each participant's

primary provider is interviewed and given a pre and post questionnaire to evaluate their goals for the program, address concerns they may have, and to assess their overall perception of the program's success. It is crucial to involve parents, caregivers, and guardians in the employment process to prepare them to assist their child in the employment process.

Families have identified barriers related to affordability of vocational programs and inability to access these programs (Ghanouni, & Seaker, 2022). Providing a vocational program in high school begins the transition process earlier, as well as ensures IEP goals are related to the students' own aspirations and career goals. It is integral to the success of the program to provide multi-modal forms of communication as well as learning methods due to the distinct needs of each individual student and their disability factors (Jacobs et al., 2018). The cost of accessing vocational programs as well as lack of funding for such programs was cited as a concern for families and professionals alike, which can be alleviated through integration into a school-based program that utilizes the school districts resources and access to free transportation, (Jacobs et al., 2018 & Ghanouni, & Seaker, 2022).

Employment preparation is multi-faceted, requiring several different professionals in order to address all areas of a student's pre-determined vocational goals. For example, state funded programs in Michigan related to the transition and employment process include several professionals including vocational rehabilitation counselors, assistive technology experts, and case managers. Collaboration with these professionals will be important to support each participant's post-secondary goals. An important aspect of

integrating this program into the school system is to address which professionals will be included in the program implementation. For example, it may be beneficial to include School Psychologists (PSY) and School Social Workers (SSW) within the process to address psychosocial needs such as improving self-efficacy and developing coping skills to utilize within the workplace (Gobelet et al., 2007). This will be easily accomplishable in a school based setting due to OTPs and other support staff collaboration with IEP goals and providing intervention to students.

Job coaches in conjunction with job placement agencies can be beneficial to utilize during this program as job coaches can work closely with students in a supportive environment, (Gobelet et al., 2007 & Tran & Tran, 2021). Positive feelings related to seeking and obtaining employment can be improved through the use of vocational rehabilitation professionals utilizing motivational interviewing techniques as well as a pre-post survey to determine outcome measures (Schlegelmilch et al., 2021). By utilizing a multi-disciplinary staff, opportunities to utilize motivational interviewing or discipline specific interventions may contribute to the overall development of the program and the success of the participants.

When providing pre-vocational training it is important to provide the best services suited to each individual (Schutz et al., 2022). Based on a student's disability, they may require graded interventions or alternative communication devices to participate in the intervention tasks and activities. This requires the program to have a distinct understanding of its participants, their goals, and the support needed for them to participate in program activities. Examples of interventions may include specific job

skills training, social skills training, communication skills training, and improving self-efficacy skills through the use of individual intervention, group discussions, team work activities, as well as through role play and repetitive learning activities (Traina et al., 2022). The *HULT* program utilizes various forms of media to present information, including 1 on 1 discussion, group discussion, worksheets, presentations, videos, and live observational learning opportunities.

OTPs have distinct training and value to contribute when providing pre-vocational skills intervention for young adults with disabilities. Within a school based OT setting, OTPs are able to utilize local programs and services to assist their students in the transition to employment following completion of their high school education. OTPs within a school based setting can also provide direct intervention to students with disabilities targeting pre-vocational and employment related skills. The implementation of a school based pre-vocational program alleviates parents and caregivers concerns of travel, cost, and limited accessibility. The *HULT* program utilizes group-based learning, resume building, interviewing, and self-efficacy development which continues to build on positive outcomes described in similar studies previously conducted. Evaluation of previous studies and relevant literature allows for the development of the *HULT* program to contain the most impactful program components and consider other authors' described weaknesses and study implications.

Chapter 4: Description of Proposed Program

Program Description

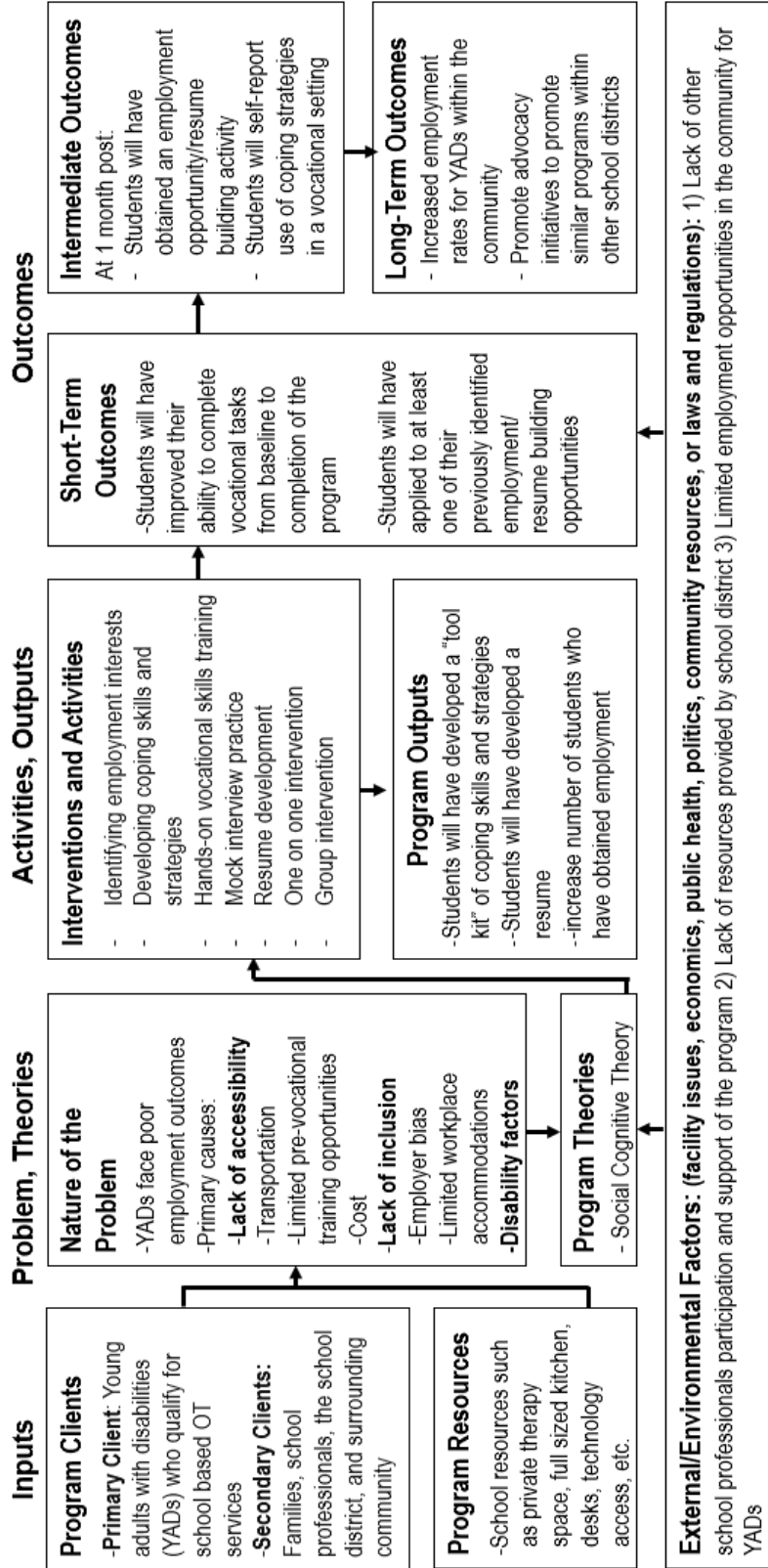
The overall purpose of self-contained classroom curriculum and programming is to prepare the students for life after high school and to improve their ability to be independent adults. Students within self-contained classrooms do not receive traditional high school diplomas; rather receiving a certificate of completion and receiving accommodations through their IEPs. As their peers prepare for college and other endeavors following graduation, students with disabilities are preparing themselves for transition programs or alternative programs to receive post-secondary education. To prepare students for this transition, implementation of a pre-vocational skills programming in high school is crucial. The *HULT* program represents a dynamic school based OT intervention that immerses students in several activities and tasks targeting improved independence related to completed pre-vocational tasks.

The overarching goal for this program is to prepare students with disabilities to improve their soft skills and to be prepared for the employment process following high school. Upon completion of the program, students will be able to identify their employment interests, practice implementing coping skills required to participate in a workplace environment, develop a resume, practice mock interviews, and improve their vocational skills through hands-on work-related activities such as those needed in a coffee shop or grocery store. Students will also be introduced to modifications and adaptations to the workplace such as use of a visual model to aid in task completion and skilled intervention from an OTP utilizing a variety of prompts such as tactile, verbal,

Figure 4.1

Full Logic Model

Program title: Helping Underserved Leaders Transition



visual, or live demonstrations. Figure 4.1 provides a brief description of program components.

Interventions and Activities

The intervention will be split into 4 different modules divided among 10 weeks. Each module is composed of different activities related to developing specific work-related skills. Each session occurs within a school based setting during the student's IEP mandated OT service time.

Module 1

The first module will include a one-on-one interview with the primary OTP and program participants. It includes a semi-structured interview regarding work interests, previous work or volunteer experiences, and identifying strengths and weaknesses. Multi-modal methods will be used such as card sorting with visual depictions of employment opportunities, searching jobs online, or identifying interests via interview depending on each student's skill level and communication style. This module will take place across 2 sessions for a total of 2 weeks. The purpose of this module is to establish rapport with the students, gauge their current perceptions of employment, and identify skills that will be useful in their employment settings of interest.

Module 2

The second module will include hands-on pre-vocational skills training. The purpose of each intervention is to provide the student with an opportunity to build several generalizable vocational skills. This will be accomplished through mock work sessions in a grocery store and coffee shop. The grocery store intervention utilizes recyclable grocery

containers to emulate groceries on a shelf. For example, participants practice locating various grocery items using a visual model or use a cash register and fake money to recreate cashier tasks. The coffee shop intervention will include making the coffee and delivering it to teachers and school staff who have ordered it. The aforementioned interventions provide the student with hands-on, realistic opportunities in a controlled environment to practice work related skills like completing routine tasks, professionalism and social interaction. This module will take place during 4 sessions for a total of 4 weeks.

Module 3

The third module includes group sessions with interactive presentations and open discussion regarding the importance of coping skills as well as identifying coping strategies. The students will be provided with educational materials related to their rights as an employee, reasonable workplace accommodations, as well as opportunities to practice various coping strategies. The implementation of this module is important as it will provide the student with concrete and tangible materials, they can provide to their employer regarding their desired workplace accommodations and encourage self-advocacy. It aims to also improve the student's self-efficacy and develop their ability to cope with work related stress, the potential of employer bias, and their own personal challenges. This module will take place during 2 sessions for a total of 2 weeks.

Module 4

The fourth and final module will include direct group instruction related to writing a resume and participating in mock interviews. The importance of group

instruction during this portion of the program cannot be overstated as it relates directly to Social Cognitive Theory and the guiding principles of observational learning. By watching other students participate in an interview or watching videos of interviews, students can model the behaviors they observe as well as continue to learn new skills. The resume writing will include discussion of previous work experiences, volunteer experiences, participation in clubs or athletics and an overview of the students' strengths. Students will have the opportunity to complete their resume and have a copy of their resume to have for future reference. This module will take place during 2 sessions for a total of 2 weeks.

Program Outputs and Outcomes

The program was developed in an effort to provide an underserved group of individuals with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills related to employment as they prepare for their transition from high school to young adulthood. Students will be given the chance to learn how to be an employee and identify coping skills they can use during this life transition. Not only will students improve their physical skills related to completing vocational tasks, but they have the opportunity to improve their self-confidence and truly believe that they can have a career they are proud of. The tangible program outputs for each student include a personalized list of accommodations within the workplace, a coping skills toolbox of handouts with strategies, as well as a finalized resume. The intangible program outputs include improved vocational skills for young adults with disabilities, identified work interests, improved interviewing skills and improved self-efficacy related to future employment.

The short-term outcomes proposed to be met one month following completion of the ten-week program include students will have applied to one of their previously identified jobs or began participating in a resume building activity such as Special Olympics or volunteering. Two to six months following the program completion, the students will be hired as an employee and maintaining their new role. The students will have demonstrated use of coping skills to manage work related stress as well as identify workplace accommodations they have been utilizing. In the long term, the program aims to improve employability and employment rates for young adults with disabilities as well as demonstrate the importance of implementing pre-vocational skills training programs within high schools. By providing evidence related to the outcomes achieved and the progress made by the program participants, other school districts may implement this program or one similar into their own practice. On a macro level, this program may provide employers to recognize the importance of hiring individuals with disabilities, implement advocacy initiatives related to hiring young adults with disabilities, and open up new opportunities within the community.

Stakeholders

The most important stakeholder to be served by this program includes young adults with disabilities and their families. There is a large responsibility for families to provide assistance, transportation, and advocacy for their young adult children in regards to employment opportunities. Previous research indicates that families struggle to provide consistent transportation to and from jobs as well as overall difficulty locating and

accessing employment training (Awsumb et al., 2022). To alleviate this issue, the proposed intervention aims to provide vocational training earlier and without the need for transportation from families, as students enrolled in high school have public transportation provided to them by the school district. Rather than waiting until completion of high school, these students will be immersed in a vocational program that correlates with their Individualized Education Program (IEP) within their high school curriculum.

Secondly, the school district and surrounding community will benefit from this program. The school district the program will be implemented within is surrounded by local businesses and companies that hire individuals with disabilities. Within the school district, high school students are provided the opportunity to complete volunteer work within different workplaces. This is an ideal opportunity for students to practice the skills they acquire during skilled intervention in the program. Companies such as Bitty and Beau's coffee hire individuals with disabilities to work within a cooperative team. By preparing students for employment during high school, students can be prepared to obtain employment at companies such as Bitty and Beau's. One of the main difficulties faced by the Special Education department in the school district the author currently practices within is related to funding. By implementing activities that can be created by utilizing readily available materials and pursuing opportunities for grants from Parent Teacher Organizations or the district, the program aims to be a cost-effective opportunity. Through the institution of the proposed program, the author aims to demonstrate success with preparing students for employment within an OT school-based setting. With the

expectation of successful outcomes, it may demonstrate to the school district the importance of funding related programs or advocating for similar programs to the community and nearby school districts.

Program Participants and Resources

The program participants include students who receive direct OT services and attend to their education within a self-contained classroom. This may include students with both mild and moderate cognitive impairments as well as several different diagnoses. Students who qualify for special education services include students with down syndrome, cognitive impairments and autism spectrum disorder among other qualifying disabilities. The resources for this program include access to a large private therapy space, a kitchen, and a school store that serves coffee and other snacks. The specific items needed for the intervention components are limited, as the interventions aim to be easily modifiable and accessible to all students and providers.

To identify students who would benefit from this program a learner profile questionnaire will be distributed to all students within a self-contained classroom and who qualify for direct OT services. Following a formal, comprehensive evaluation, students who qualify for Special Education Services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2023) may be eligible for OT services. These services are warranted based on results of fine motor, visual motor, sensory and further assessments targeting a student's ability to participate in their primary occupation; education. Depending on the student and their unique strengths, recommendations and goals they will either qualify for direct or consultative services.

Students seen on a consultative basis do not require direct skilled intervention to perform their daily tasks as a student and a learner. Students who require direct, skilled intervention on a monthly basis will benefit most from the proposed program.

The proposed program is to be carried out primarily by an OTP. Within a school system, a multidisciplinary team of allied health professionals work in conjunction to support the needs of each student. The purpose of this program is to improve students' ability to obtain a meaningful employment opportunity and to develop the skills needed to do so. Although each component of the program is within the scope of OT, it is important to recognize that resume building, mock interviews and the development of coping strategies are certainly within the scope of speech language pathology (SLP), SSW or other professionals within the school system. These factors warrant the program personnel to also include these disciplines and offer the opportunity for further development of the program. For example, the program materials will provide SLPs and SSWs with the opportunity to input their knowledge to ensure strategies and interventions from their prospective discipline are being represented. This may be achieved through co-treatment sessions throughout the program. The overall goal is that an OT can conduct this program individually or in conjunction with another member of the ancillary staff.

The program is designed to take place within a high school. Each school district and individual building has a different layout including the fact that school based OTPs typically travel between schools and are not guaranteed to have a private office setting. This program requires access to a room that includes access to technology including wireless internet and a projector. Task components are explained in further detail in

Chapter 7, noting tasks will require equipment which is typically found within a standard classroom such as tables, chairs, and bookshelves.

Outreach

The outreach for this program includes presentations and advocacy opportunities within the school district and in the community. OTPs working within a school setting work with an administrative team that represents the district and oversees its operations. To promote the implementation of the *HULT* Program, the author intends to present rationale for the program via in-person meetings and presentations. The material provided will include statistics demonstrating the dire need for pre-vocational programs and how placing such programs in a school system alleviates several concerns for families such as transportation and cost. The author will propose the interventions and answer relevant questions regarding funding, fidelity, and logistics related to implementation.

Similarly, this information will be presented to the school professionals who may have an interest in participating in this program. For example, discussing the program components with SLPs, SSW, and self-contained classroom teachers. These individuals work with the students who would be interested in this program and would benefit from their expertise. Activities such as coping skill building, mock interviews, and development of resumes include components that each professional can contribute to. It will be important to discuss the program interventions in detail with the members of the IEP team as well as other school staff such as Teacher Assistants (TAs).

Surveys via email will be sent to families who have students within a self-contained high school program and receive OT services in an effort to gain outreach to

interested families. This will provide a brief overview of the program components as well as information regarding permission to participate in a research study. The primary OTP will interview each interested family via an online platform such as Zoom or in person and provide the opportunity to answer questions and provide more in-depth information.

Anticipated Barriers and Challenges

One of the barriers that impacts the successful implementation of the *HULT* program is limited participation of other professionals within the special education team and overall resistance to change. The school district this program will be taking place within does have an existing life skills training program. This program has a plethora of components and content areas, but it is less realistic than the proposed program's components. Secondly, the program is very difficult to implement and must be managed by a single individual, therefore lacking the opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration and group participation. Although the school does not currently utilize this skills training program, there may still be resistance from staff regarding implementing a new program, data tracking, and other logistical considerations. To alleviate this, education and collaboration is of utmost importance. It will be important for the primary OTP to gain the trust of other professionals and provide them with information they will find meaningful and beneficial to gain their support and assistance. There may be district level concerns regarding cost, funding, and space for implementation of the program. Not every school has access to a kitchen or a private therapy space. This may be problematic in terms of where to conduct interventions, but can be alleviated through utilization of easily accessible and adaptable task materials.

Another barrier may include the lack of employment opportunities within the community for young adults with disabilities. Workplace bias is prevalent and a huge contributing factor for the large gap in employment opportunities for this group of individuals (Fyhn et al., 2021). To alleviate this barrier, students will be provided with education and materials related to their rights as an employee as well as be prepared for the hiring process with a resume and interviewing experience. The primary OTP can aid in advocacy efforts while reaching out to local companies and small businesses looking for employees within the students previously identified work interests. Bitty and Beau's is a coffee shop that is rooted in promoting inclusion and equal job opportunities as well as being located within the school district's local community. Connecting with companies like Bitty and Beau's Coffee Shop can warrant successful outcomes and improved advocacy for young adults with disabilities.

Summary and Conclusions

YADs are at a unique disadvantage when it comes to employability. These individuals face barriers such as workplace discrimination, limited accessibility to work training programs, as well as coping with their individual disability factors. When compared to same aged peers without disabilities, it is clear to see the wide gap between opportunity and inclusion. To promote inclusion and accessibility to vocational education, it is imperative that high school OTPs develop and implement them into weekly intervention sessions. Vocational training may include hands-on work skills, development of coping skills, mock interview sessions as well as education regarding the individual's rights as a person with disabilities. These intervention components in

conjunction with theoretical models and identification of contributing factors can aid in closing the gap and providing underserved leaders with the opportunity to maintain employment.

Chapter 5: Program Evaluation Research Plan

Research Design

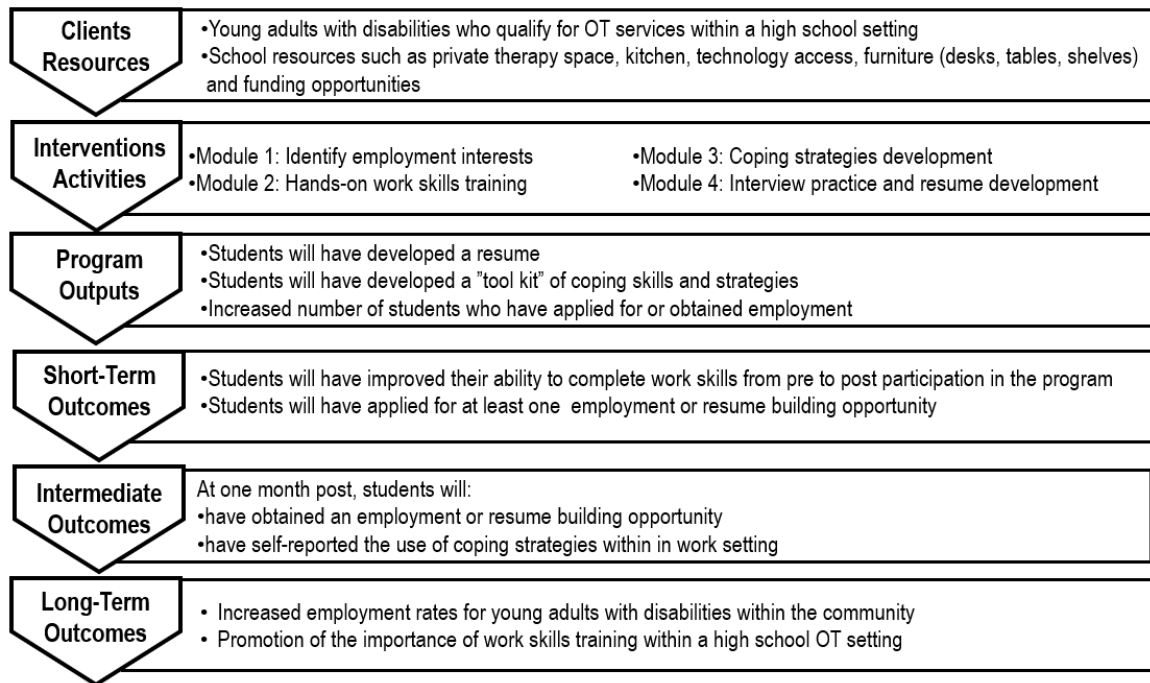
For the purpose of the proposed program, it will be most effective to utilize a mixed methods study due to relevant information that can be derived from the program including both qualitative and quantitative data. The program will utilize semi-structured interviews. During the first 2 weeks of the program, students and their parents/guardians will be interviewed and will complete surveys that includes 3 questions on a 4-point Likert scale and three short answer questions. Semi-structured interviews with students and their parents/guardians will also be conducted one week following the completion of the program. Formative research questions will be utilized for the pre and post program interviews and allow interviewees to answer open-ended questions about their experience throughout the program. Interviews with the students will be conducted via multi-modal modes of communication including but not limited to AAC devices, visuals, written expression or verbal communication.

The program will utilize an experimental design in an effort to gain insight on the causal outcomes as related to the program interventions. Due to this program being conducted in a school setting, it would not be ethical to refrain from servicing all students as in a comparison group. Therefore, all students eligible for direct OT services who have written consent for program participation will be assessed before and after the program. Program evaluation is imperative for future development of the program as well as ensuring fidelity for being utilized as a model program for other initiatives. The simplified logic model below (Figure 5.1) depicts the main program components and

anticipated outcomes.

Figure 5.1

Simplified Logic Model



Methods Section

Following informative group-based discussion and individual interviews with potential program participants and their families/guardians, parental or guardian consent will be obtained for the student to participate within the program. Consent will be obtained following a meeting with each family discussing the goals of the program and how it can suit their students' specific vocational needs and long-term goals for employment. In terms of confidentiality, all students' personal health information will be protected using numerical labels associated with each student's data as the program

progresses. This data will be stored on a secure laptop, where only the primary OTP will have access to both the students' information and the coded labels that correspond with each student. Specific research methods are outlined below.

Qualitative Methods

Semi-structured interviews will be utilized with the students, their families, and other relevant stakeholders. The primary OTP conducts interviews with the program participants utilizing semi-structured research questions and allowing students to describe their self-perceived present level of employment related skills and concerns and/or questions through an open-ended approach (See Appendix E). The primary OT conducts semi-structured interviews with the family and/or caregivers of the participants. (See Appendix E).

Grounded theory is the framework utilized to analyze the content retrieved from the interviews. The initial coding process will take place following initial interviews with both the participants and their families and/or caregivers. The purpose of this preliminary process is to determine both similarities and differences among the interviewees responses and begin to develop a list of common words or phrases (Chun et al., 2021). Next, theoretical sampling is utilized to determines gaps in the initial data. For example, secondary interviews may occur with relevant individuals who can provide insight related to the gaps identified. The next phase outlined by Chun et al., 2021 is the intermediate coding phase in which categories are identified using the initial data. These categories describe the phrases previously identified into larger concepts. Finally in the advanced coding phase, the data describes a theory related to the data collected, demonstrating

transactional relationships between the concepts and categories identified in the data.

This final stage allows the primary OTP to describe the theory produced.

Using audio transcription and recording services via Zoom, the primary OT will be able to extrapolate the interview content during the data analysis phase. This information will be key in determining the participants perceptions regarding their vocational skills pre and post program implementation. The interview with caregivers and/or parents will take place during the first module of the program to determine the personal goals they have for their student, desired outcomes, and provide opportunities for questions and open dialogue regarding perceptions of the program.

An initial survey will be sent to IEP team members, relevant school staff and school district administrators before the program begins. Information gathered from the survey will be utilized to determine this group of stakeholders' pre and post program opinions, perceptions, questions and insights. This data will be utilized to assess if multidisciplinary collaboration can have an impact on the student's ability to retain work skills, as well as be used to determine how the program can be improved from another disciplines point of view.

Qualitative Data Management and Analysis

While conducting interviews, it will be important to utilize a program that will transcribe as individuals are speaking. There are several programs that can be utilized including the Audio feature on Mac Laptops which are provided by the school district for the primary OT. Zoom allows recording and provides audio transcription services that can be utilized for coding purposes. These files can be securely stored and the

transcriptions utilized for data analysis. In an effort to improve rigor, the analysis will look for meanings and trends from interviews using coding applications within a data program. It will also be of utmost importance for the analyzing individuals to include expert opinion and reach out to statisticians for assistance as needed.

Quantitative Methods

For the proposed program, the intervention components for the students include activities related to improving self-esteem, developing coping skills to utilize within workplaces, interviewing skills practice, resume development, as well as activities directly related to improving vocational skills. The intervention activities above will serve as independent variables for this program and aim to directly impact the dependent variables below.

The dependent variables being analyzed in the program include self-esteem, coping skills, and vocational skills. The variables coping and vocational skills will be assessed through a pre-posttest to measure the effectiveness of the educational program on students' ability to identify career interests and complete work tasks. The pre-posttest portion of the program will take across a ten-week time frame where students are assessed during the first week of the program and during the final week of the program. The students perceived ability to identify coping skills and complete vocational tasks will be assessed using a Likert scale (Appendix C) in an effort to retrieve numerical data. For example, before the program a student may report that their ability to identify employment settings of interest as a 2 out of 4 on a Likert scale. Following the

intervention, the program aims to see improvement in the students' ability to identify employment interests such as rating themselves a 3 out of 4 on a Likert scale.

Parents and guardians will be given a similar pre-post assessment including questions regarding their perceptions of their student's employment strengths and related skills (Appendix D).

Quantitative Data Management and Analysis

In terms of quantitative data, the author will utilize surveys with Likert scales that can be used to assess the numerical data found from the outcomes of the program. This may include the students' self-perceived level of self-esteem or ability to name and utilize coping strategies. To collect formative data initially, as well as following completion of the program for each of the students. For other stakeholders, formative data will be assessed twice; once at the beginning of the program and again during the final week of the program. It will be important to minimize bias and to do so, the program utilizes other professionals involved in the implementation portion of the program to analyze the data collected and ensure it is free of bias and reports objective data. When collecting responses from surveys, a data collection program such as NVivo or SPSS will be utilized. These programs allow for inputting data as well as coding and operationalizing the variables. This will be completed on a secure computer to ensure credibility as well as confidentiality.

Data Analysis

In terms of data collection and analysis, the primary OT will be the individual who enters the data into a program for data collection. To alleviate bias and improve rigor and validity, it is anticipated to employ members from the implementation team to assist with these efforts. Data will be collected on one laptop, which is provided by the school district and is protected by programs installed by the district. When using Google Forms for Likert scale collection, the primary OT will be able to easily transfer the answers into a spreadsheet. When utilizing SPSS, spreadsheets can be directly placed into the program for analysis. The primary OT and implementation team will be vigilant in ensuring human error is not present and that the data is monitored by select members of the team to ensure confidentiality.

During data analysis, it will be important to organize descriptive data related to demographic information regarding the students and their families or caregivers. This information may be effective to measure how successful the program is for the students and potentially offer insight on how a vocational program may be successful for individuals with various disabilities; rather than one specific population as previous studies have done. Inferential data will be utilized to assess how successful the program interventions were and how much the program components impacted the outcomes seen at the end of the program. In an effort to remain organized, members of the implementation team will be assigned to compile data from the students. The author will focus on compiling data from the employers as they will be the contact person for them throughout the process. Building rapport with these individuals can help ensure follow

through and establish the importance of what they are learning throughout the participation in the program.

Anticipated Strengths and Limitations

The entire purpose of this program is to improve young adults with disabilities and their ability to pursue a career after completing high school. Parents and family members of these individuals face unique challenges as their child reaches adulthood and prepares for the transition to adulthood. The proposed program aims to educate parents, caregivers, and other professionals on the importance of Occupational therapy intervention in regards to vocational skills. Strengths to this program include the evidenced-based literature the program was developed in reference to. These programs have demonstrated improved vocational outcomes for young adults with varying disabilities such as physical conditions, Autism, and intellectual disabilities (Bal et al., 2020; Gorenstein et al., 2020; & Temizkan et al., 2022). Similarly, several articles were utilized as evidence for the critical barriers impeding young adults with disabilities from employment opportunities. The proposed program was developed to directly address these impacts such as lack of transportation and limited accessibility to pre-vocational programming (Pfeiffer et al., 2021 & Degeneffe et al., 2022).

One limitation of the proposed program is the limited evidence related to pre-vocational programming within a school-based Occupational Therapy setting. This setting has unique challenges and limitations in terms of conducting a research study. Students receive Occupational Therapy services through their IEP and based on their

individual needs. Some students do not receive OT services, which limits the number of overall program participants. Schedules vary during the school year and there may be half-days, breaks, or unexpected school closures during the program intervention. This may skew the students' progress, therefore impacting data results.

Another limitation of the proposed program is the number of variables being measured and the potential of external factors benefitting or improving the skills being measured. It may be difficult to prove that a student's improvement from baseline to post is completely due to the program intervention. There is potential for improved coping skills to be developed during SSW intervention, or to improve in interviewing skills due to SLP intervention. It will be important to recognize these variables when analyzing the program research data and when extrapolating recommendations for clinical practice.

OTPs play a key role in providing skill intervention related to obtaining and maintaining employment opportunities. This may include determining work interests, developing work related skills, participating in resume writing, and preparing for interviews, (OTPF, 2020). The program will improve vocational outcomes for participants through client centered intervention, student led objectives, and implementation of both individual and group-based intervention models.

Chapter 6: Dissemination Plan

Program Description

HULT is a pre-vocational skills program designed to be implemented within high school OT intervention. The program was developed to target young adults with disabilities who have employment aspirations following completion of their high school education. Within the state of Michigan, young adults with disabilities are entitled to educational programming until age 26. The primary purpose of postsecondary programs is to prepare students for the transition to adulthood, employment and independent living. By introducing a similar program in high school, students are exposed to pre-vocational skill development earlier in their educational careers. This affords students the opportunity to develop the skills necessary for their post-secondary education including sheltered workshops, pre-vocational training activities, and experiences in the community. The *HULT* program targets five topics throughout a series of modules: identifying workplace interests, hands-on vocational skills training, mock interviews, resume development, and coping skills development.

Dissemination Goals

The overall goal of the *HULT* program is to provide hands-on educational experiences for young adults with disabilities targeting pre-vocational skills within a school-based setting. By introducing students to pre-vocational skills programming earlier, they are more prepared for the next chapter of their education and young adulthood. The short-term goal is to implement the *HULT* program at all three high schools in the author's current practice setting and school district. Ensuring that all

students in the district have access to the program allows for continued outcome measuring and data analysis to assess the success of the program.

On a community level, dissemination of successful results following participation in the *HULT* program allows for continued advocacy for the employment of individuals with disabilities. By sharing data outcomes and educating future employers in the community, young adults with disabilities may have the opportunity to seek and obtain employment opportunities. Increasing employment rates for young adults with disabilities can also be achieved through implementation of similar programs in other school districts and by sharing the program with school-based professionals of all disciplines who work with this group of individuals targeting similar skills.

Target Audience

The primary audience includes district level school administrators within the primary OTPs practicing school district. Implementation of initiatives and district wide programming is facilitated through administrators who can provide valuable resources such as marketing, and logistical support. By sharing the key takeaways from the *HULT* program and its initial implementation at one of the three high schools in the district, administrators can utilize the data to implement the program among all three high schools. By doing so, all students will have access to the same program and materials, demonstrating a united front as a school district and Special Education Department. The *HULT* program and the outcomes associated with it can be utilized to promote the district's self-contained programming and model to surrounding districts the importance

and benefits of a pre-vocational program in their high school. It is beneficial to target individuals on a broader level to promote advocacy and implementation of similar programs. By sharing the key takeaways from the *HULT* program and the data obtained, students and their families can learn the benefit of participating in a pre-vocational skills program. The primary audience can also be educated regarding the large gap in employment rates.

Key Messages

1. *HULT* is a cost-effective, hands-on pre-vocational skills training initiative that yields improved vocational skills for high school students with disabilities. *HULT* addresses the wide gap between employment for young adults with disabilities and their same aged neurotypical peers. Implementation among all district high schools would allow for all students within self-contained classrooms to develop the skills necessary for successful employment.
2. Students who participated in the *HULT* program demonstrated improvement in pre-vocational skills from baseline to completion of the program. Improved vocational skills in this group demonstrates improvement towards employability and overall employment outcomes. The positive outcomes from this program can be used to advocate to local community organizations and companies to hire students with disabilities; developing a partnership between the school district and local companies.

Sources

The primary OT, along with key members from the IEP team will communicate

the key messages to the administrators within the school district. Special Education Teachers, SLPs, and other service providers within the IEP team have valuable knowledge and expertise to share regarding the program and the success of the students who participated.

The primary OT will communicate the key messages to district level administrators. It may be impactful to promote the outcome results on the community level, sharing it with neighboring schools and families who may benefit. This may promote advocacy efforts for implementation of a pre-vocational skills program in high schools in surrounding communities. There are several organizations in the practicing community and surrounding areas that provide services for YADs. It will be important to target those organizations to share the purpose of the program, discuss the reasons the program was developed, and share the outcomes to encourage families to seek similar programs for their students.

Dissemination Activities

The activities utilized to disseminate the program data include both written information and in-person or virtual meeting(s). The development of this resource and dissemination is the responsibility of the primary occupational therapist.

The school administrators will be provided with an informational brochure including current evidence related to the reasons young adults with disabilities have low employment rates, a more in-depth description of data collected, and data analysis methods. This resource will be provided digitally via email to the administration team one week prior to a virtual meeting. The development of this resource is the

responsibility of the primary occupational therapist and members of the IEP team who contributed throughout the program.

Dissemination of the program outcomes during this virtual meeting is the responsibility of the primary occupational therapist. Participating IEP team members who wish to contribute to the discussion with the administration team are welcome to. The purpose of this meeting is to advocate for the implementation of the program, share program outcomes, and demonstrate the distinct value of OT intervention for pre-vocational skills training. A virtual discussion allows for all available and relevant individuals to participate in the conversation.

Budget

Due to the accessible nature of practicing within a school district, there are limited costs associated with the dissemination of information. The author primarily utilized resources readily available for use within the practicing school district, but the table below outlines costs for the purpose of implementation elsewhere. Both the primary and secondary audiences will be provided with digital instruction on Zoom, utilizing written materials developed using Canva Pro.

Table 6.1*Dissemination Budget*

	Item	Cost	Total (1 year)
	Canva Pro	\$12.99/month	\$119.99
	Zoom Pro	\$14.99/month	\$149.99
Overall Total Cost			\$537.98

Evaluation

To evaluate the success of the written educational information and live discussion provided to school district administrators, a pre- and post-test will be utilized via Google Forms. The pre-test will include five questions; three using a 4-point Likert scale to assess the audience's perceptions of pre-vocational programs, current level of knowledge regarding employment rates for YADs, and current level of knowledge related to school based OT. The final two questions will be open-ended. The first question will ask the audience to identify three programs or initiatives utilized by the district currently targeting pre-vocational skills training. The second question will ask the audience to identify three interventions or topics impactful for students with disabilities to be successful in their employment endeavors. The post-test will include the same 4-point Likert scale questions as mentioned above. The post-test will also include two open ended questions asking participants to share their perceptions of the *HULT* program and identify three interventions or topic areas they learned to be impactful for preparing students with disabilities for employment.

Conclusion

The purpose of disseminating the results from the *HULT* program is to demonstrate the need for easily accessible pre-vocational programs, advocate for implementation of similar programs across school districts, and educate primary stakeholders regarding the success of a school-based pre-vocational skills program. The data collected from both the primary and secondary audiences will allow for continued development of the program and future dissemination plans to improve the overall program outcomes. On a macro level, reaching out to neighboring districts, communities, and programs for young adults with disabilities allows for the opportunity to share the positive program outcomes and for continued advocacy efforts.

Chapter 7: Funding Plan

Introduction

The *HULT* program is a pre-vocational skills program intended to be implemented within a school-based OT setting. Students may participate in this program based on qualifying for direct occupational therapy services and receiving education within a self-contained classroom setting. The program will take place across 10 weeks and is split into four different modules. The proposed program was designed to alleviate factors contributing to this gap including limited transportation, accessibility to pre-vocational training, and personal factors such as present level work skills and self-esteem (Awsumb et al., 2022, Pfeiffer et al., 2021, & Lindsay et al 2021). Funding is required for this program to purchase the required materials necessary to conduct the intervention tasks and activities. Funding will be utilized to purchase programs required for virtual interviews and development of educational materials. OTPs working within a school setting have the opportunity to apply for grants and scholarships within the district. Accessing these resources and potential sources of funding in the community will allow the *HULT* program to provide participants with the most well-rounded educational experience.

Available Local Resources

The proposed program will initially take place within a high school in Michigan. The school is located within a large city with a large sense of community and opportunities for employment. There are several local businesses that have previously provided volunteer opportunities for students with disabilities in the community. Bitty &

Beau's Coffee Shop is a nationwide organization with one mission: inclusion. This one-of-a-kind organization provides employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities and has a location within the community. Bitty & Beau's Coffee Shop strives to advocate and conduct outreach to the local community. A partnership with Bitty & Beau's Coffee Shop would be of mutual benefit. The company can provide support for implementation of the *HULT* program within local school districts as well as provide employment opportunities for students who participate in the program.

The multidisciplinary team of school-based professionals working within the high school special education department are experts to be utilized throughout the program as valuable resources and stakeholders. SSW, SLPs, PSYs, Physical Therapists (PTs), and teachers are all professionals who may work within a special education department team, supporting students in high school with disabilities. The *HULT* program invites collaboration among other disciplines and provides the opportunity to provide co-treatment during pre-vocational skills training. It will be beneficial to utilize the knowledge of these professionals especially during the initial phases of the program. For example, it may be useful to discuss interviewing skills with a SLP to gather information and evidence directly from their specific discipline. This will not only improve the quality of the intervention provided but improve the rigor of the program and proposed study.

School district administrators also play a key role in the implementation of the proposed program as well as in providing resources. Administrators have responsibilities beyond direct student intervention, organizing logistics and ensuring adherence to laws

and policies, among other district level clerical and organizational duties. These professionals have the educational background and knowledge to develop policies and promote better practices within the school district. It will be vital to ensure district administrators are invested in the proposed program and to discuss the need for potential resources such as funding, supplies, and support throughout the research process. Administrators working within the special education department may have the ability to provide individuals who have research experience or professional expertise in the topic area. Utilizing this group of professionals will benefit the program while also benefiting the district by providing a pre-vocational skill building program to be potentially implemented among other buildings within the district.

Budget Description

The following budgets were developed to project anticipated program costs for two years. The budgets were developed utilizing the *HULT* program's module components and determining the cost of the required task materials for the interventions. The items required to perform the tasks and activities are detailed in Table 7.1 and Table 7.2. Costs associated with dissemination of the program results are listed in Table 7.3 and detailed costs are outlined in Table 6.1. The proposed budget items are rounded to account for sales tax upon purchase

Table 7.1*HULT Program Budget – Grocery Store Intervention*

Grocery Store		
Supplies	Year 1 Cost	Year 2 Cost
Grocery Containers	\$100 (throughout the year as needed)	\$100.00 (throughout the year as needed)
<u>Amazon Basics Shelf</u>	\$110 (1 time purchase)	X
<u>Labels</u>	\$20 (1 time purchase)	X
<u>Cash Register</u>	\$40 (1 time purchase)	X
<u>Reusable Grocery Bag</u>	\$18 (1 time purchase)	X
Total		
Year 1	\$288.00	
Year 2	\$100.00	
2-year total:	\$388.00	

Table 7.2*HULT Program Budget – Coffee Shop Intervention*

Coffee Shop		
Supplies	Year 1 Cost	Year 2 Cost
<u>Keurig Machine</u> (2x)	\$100.00 (1 time purchase)	X
<u>Coffee Pods</u> (4x)	\$480.00 (\$155 purchased 3x/year)	\$480.00 (\$155 purchased 3x/year)
<u>Disposable Cups</u>	\$180.00 (\$90 purchase 2x/year)	\$180.00 (\$90 purchase 2x/year)
<u>Disposable Lids</u>	\$120.00 (\$60 purchase 2x/year)	\$120.00 (\$60 purchase 2x/year)
<u>Creamer</u>	\$60 (\$30 purchase 2x/year)	\$60 (\$30 purchase 2x/year)
<u>Sugar</u>	\$30 (\$15 purchase 2x/year)	\$30 (\$15 purchase 2x/year)
<u>Tea</u>	\$90 (\$45 purchase 2x/year)	\$90 (\$45 purchase 2x/year)
Total		
Year 1	\$1060.00	
Year 2	\$960.00	
2-year total:	\$2408.00	

Table 7.3*HULT Program Budget*

Program Component	Total Cost
Grocery Store Intervention	\$388.00
Coffee Shop Intervention	\$2408.00
Dissemination	\$539.78
Total	\$3,723.78

The school-based coffee shop budget was developed to account for implementation of the program year-round, following the initial 10-week intervention. The supplies needed for the coffee shop are to be purchased on a monthly basis, following the nine-month school schedule beginning September to May. To determine the yearly costs, the price of each individual item was multiplied by nine, the number of months in the school year. The coffee shop budget was developed utilizing a similar program currently implemented within the school district of the proposed program. The monthly costs were determined with the anticipated number of customers being 20 teachers and school staff during four to five school days each month. The Kirkland Brand K-Cups from Costco provide 120 individual servings. Four various coffee flavors were selected including decaf. Coffee pods would need to be purchased up to three times per year depending on the number of customers and popularity of options provided. Cups, lids, creamer, sugar, and tea are all to be purchased twice a year. For other school districts

looking to implement this program, it may be beneficial to provide potential customers with a survey to gauge interests and preferences to determine the number of supplies and frequency of purchase.

The grocery store intervention was developed to utilize a similar intervention currently implemented in the author's own practice and accounts for yearly program costs. Most of the items required for this intervention are one-time purchases, including the cash register, fake money, shelves, and grocery bags. These items can be exchanged for commonly found items or donations such as used shopping bags or recyclable food containers. The author currently has access to a large shelving unit provided by the school district. Furniture and classroom supplies vary from school to school. Therefore, for the purpose of this budget, shelving options were provided as a one-time purchase. If a program is unable to get donations of recyclables or cleaned out containers, it is recommended to purchase grocery items to use during meal preparation tasks. Each time groceries are purchased for a classroom cooking task; the containers can be used for the grocery shopping intervention. Lastly, labels will be created and used as price tags for the intervention. The author utilizes envelope labels by printing prices directly on them. For other school districts looking to implement this program, it is a cost-effective option as many of the task materials can be provided by school district or via donations and sifting through used household items.

Potential Funding Sources

Community grants that may be available to cover program costs include grants within the school district. There are also funds given yearly to school staff from the

Parent Teacher Organization. These funds are not always directly provided to occupational therapists and may vary from school to school. The grants available each year vary from school to school but there are several district wide opportunities including the Ann Arbor Public Schools Educational Fund (AAPSEF) Classroom Grant Program, which provides funding to programs that “...enrich the learning experience and provide the skills and proficiency required for employment and further education for all students...” It will be important to frequently search for district wide grant opportunities with qualifications related to the proposed program.

Within the school district of the proposed pilot program, the special education department raises money each year via fundraising. Students within the self-contained special education classrooms prepare for fundraising events by creating items to be sold, participating in marketing to the school, and being actively involved in fundraising activities. The money raised each year is used by the school’s self-contained classrooms to pay for groceries used during meal preparation activities, transportation, and miscellaneous supplies. Through collaboration with the teachers, it may be possible to distribute a portion of the fundraising money towards buying supplies needed for the proposed program. The program’s proposed program components include activities that can be easily implemented within the school and classroom environment; benefitting from use of typical classroom resources such as those already being purchased by the fundraising efforts. Table 7.4 outlines the potential sources of funding that have been identified to be applicable for the *HULT* program.

Table 7.4*Potential Funding Sources*

Funding

Source	Potential Amount (\$)
Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO)	Varies
Ann Arbor Public Schools Educational Fund (AAPSEF)	Undisclosed
Classroom Fundraising	Varies

Conclusion

The *HULT* program was developed to be easily accessible to professionals and students within a school-based setting. As outlined in the budget, the program is cost effective and does not require extensive material or resources to be utilized. The *HULT* program provides skilled pre-vocational intervention to young adults with disabilities within their self-contained classrooms. There are several resources available within the school based setting to provide guidance, necessary supplies, and logistical support to promote and ensure the success of the program. These resources include school professionals and administrators, as well as local communities who support the mission of inclusive employment. It will be crucial for the success of the program to ensure district administrators are in support of the implementation and remain invested in the program's outcome.

Successful program outcomes may warrant continued research opportunities within the district as well as implementation of this program among other high schools.

Collaboration with school based special education professionals is valuable for the further development of the program, conducting data analysis, and monitoring program outcomes. Overall, implementation of the *HULT* program aims to be seamlessly integrated among school-based OT interventions, utilizing realistic and easily attainable resources.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The *HULT* program was developed to address the factors that contribute to the significantly wide gap in employment rates for young adults with disabilities when compared to same aged peers. Limited access to pre-vocational programs, difficulty with consistent transportation, and an individual's specific disability factors all play a role in impacting students' abilities to seek meaningful employment opportunities.

Implementation of a pre-vocational skills program within a school based OT setting provides an opportunity for students to be immersed in hands-on vocational training throughout their high school education. Student's will be prepared for various post-secondary education programs following the completion of high school. Students and their families collaboratively begin the employment process earlier, giving them the opportunity to ask questions, gain clarity, and begin to plan for their future in an inclusive and efficient manner.

Current evidence related to employment for individuals with disabilities is a growing area of research. *HULT* utilized relevant literature to inspire the intervention activities selected for use within the program. Although limited evidence was found related to specifically providing pre-vocational skills training in a school based OT setting, evidence utilized was relevant for the age group of high school and post-secondary students. Previous program studies have attempted to address the barriers identified to impact employability in young adults with disabilities. Transportation impacts individuals' ability to access pre-vocational and work opportunities. By implementing pre-vocational programs in high school, transportation difficulties and

problems associated with cost are eliminated. Education related to workplace accommodations provided to the students and their families aims to improve employment outcomes by limiting employer bias. Dissemination of and advocacy for the program outcomes to local employers and businesses also aims to limit employer bias. A student's cognitive and physical abilities as well as their level of self-esteem are impacting factors that contribute to overall poor employability. These skills are addressed in *HULT* through hands-on skills training, group-based activities, and coping strategy development. Strengths and limitations from previous studies and relevant literature were impactful when developing the intervention components and the overall theoretical and evidence-based outline of the *HULT* program.

OTPs provide a unique lens through which we address the aforementioned factors impeding individuals with disabilities from employment opportunities. An article published by AOTA advocates for the importance of utilizing community-based resources alongside pre-vocational training (Carrasquillo & Gerken, 2021), furthermore supporting the impact of OTP intervention throughout the employment process. The primary program is to be implemented within a school district in Michigan. Therefore, a number of programs, resources and agencies have been identified in an effort to provide an outline of potential support and collaboration for the *HULT* program while also informing others of the programs available. *HULT* aims to contribute to the growing body of evidence related to young adults with disabilities and pre-vocational interventions and programs effective in supporting them in their employment goals. *HULT* is unique in its delivery within a school setting by an OTP, adding innovative information to the OT

evidence base related to providing skilled vocational training to YADs.

The primary purpose of *HULT* is to provide YADs with the opportunity to develop the skills needed to acquire a job they find fulfilling. Students participating in the program will be given the autonomy to identify work interests and work alongside their peers while learning about the transition from student to employee. The program is interactive, rooted in Social Learning Theory and Observational Learning principles. Students are given the unique experience of working alongside their peers towards the goal of employment after high school. Parents and caregivers of YADs benefit from *HULT* and are involved throughout the program via interviews and check-ins with the primary OTP. Parents and caregivers' perceptions, thoughts, and concerns are useful in providing a client-centered intervention for each student and ensuring the student's goals align with the families' values, resources, and long-term family plans. The school district and surrounding community benefits from implementation of *HULT* through improving advocacy for employment of YADs, providing an evidence based pre-vocational program for use in other schools, and improving employment outcomes and overall quality of life for young adults in the community.

Appendix A

Executive Summary

Introduction

Young adults with disabilities face unique challenges when seeking employment. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), a mere 21% of individuals with disabilities were employed in 2022. The families and caregivers of students with disabilities face several barriers. Difficulty with transportation, accessibility to programs, and funding play a role in low employment rates for individuals with disabilities. Employment allows individuals with disabilities to participate socially within their community, earn money, and increase their overall independence. Young adults with disabilities benefit from participating in work skills training programs to improve their overall employability and independence with life skills.

Overview of the Problem

There are three primary factors that contribute to poor employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities. 1. Workplace Discrimination: In the US, states with higher prejudice have lower employment rates for individuals with disabilities (Friedman, 2020) and workplace accommodations may not be reasonably provided. 2. Lack of Accessibility to work training and employment opportunities. Students may be unable to drive themselves to work and public transportation may be difficult to navigate. Families and caregivers may be unable to provide consistent transportation and post-secondary programs are only provided until age 26 in Michigan (Michigan Alliance for Families, 2019). 3. Disability factors impacting the students work performance: Poor self-efficacy

can impact one's ability to identify work interests, set goals, and perform work tasks efficiently (Andersen et al., 2018). Each student has various strengths and weaknesses that impact their ability to obtain and maintain employment.

Addressing the Problem

Helping Underserved Leaders Transition (HULT) is a program to provide high school students with pre-vocational skills training. The 10-week program takes place within a school based occupational therapy setting and includes: Identifying employment interests, hands-on work skills activities, completing work tasks, within a mock grocery store, completing work tasks within a school coffee shop, coping and self-efficacy skills development, and resume writing and interview preparation.

Current Evidence

Occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) have a distinct role in providing skilled intervention targeting employment skills (AOTA, 2020). In particular, school-based OTPs have a distinct role targeting pre-vocational and life skills in high school students with disabilities, (Carrasquillo & Gerken, 2021). Similar studies have found that mock interviewing and creating resumes during the program led to improved employment skills for young adults with intellectual disabilities (Agarwal et al., 2020). Whole group activities and instruction led nearly half of the program participants to obtain employment or increase weekly work hours (Gorenstein et al., 2020). Group sessions, skills training and role-playing led nearly half of the program participants to obtain paid and competitive employment (Bal et al., 2021) Increased self-efficacy can improve one's ability to transition into employment (Andersen et al., 2018) Exploring student's work

interests and goals can prompt their personal participation in the employment process (Lindsay et al., 2020)

HULT Program Outputs and Outcomes

Following completion of the program, students will have practiced the following skills: identifying work interests, identifying local businesses for employment opportunities, mock interviewing, self-efficacy and self-esteem building. Following completion of the program, students will have the following materials: a list of workplace accommodations, a tool kit of coping strategies, a physical and digital copy of their resume.

Target Audience

Administrators will be provided with materials and information related to employment rates for individuals with disabilities and the evidence supporting utilizing pre-vocational programming. Working alongside administrators allows for advocacy opportunities for implementation of the HULT program across all of the district's high schools. Working alongside administrators allows for outreach to nearby schools and communities demonstrating the impact of utilizing pre-vocational programming within a high school setting

Funding

The *HULT* program aims to be accessible and cost effective, utilizing commonly found materials and items used within a classroom. Several items required for the program are one-time purchases. Potential funding sources include community and school district grants; and classroom donations and fundraising.

Conclusion

Employment is an important part of a young adult's transition to adulthood. Individuals with disabilities are less likely to obtain employment when compared to same aged neurotypical peers. Participation in pre-vocational and life skills training programs can improve young adults with disabilities ability to prepare for and obtain employment they find meaningful. Participation in the *HULT* program provides students with work skills training in high school, targeting the skills necessary to be successful in post-secondary education or employment endeavors.

Appendix B

Fact Sheet

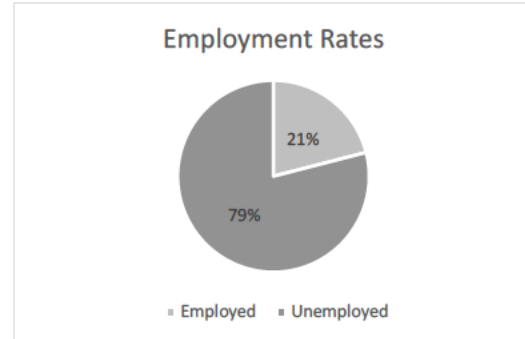


Helping Underserved Leaders Transition A School Based Pre-vocational Skills Program

Erin Hult MS, OTR/L
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The Widening Gap:

Helping Underserved Leaders Transition (*HULT*) is a school based pre-vocational skills program targeting young adults with disabilities (YADs). YADs face unique barriers that impact them from seeking meaningful employment opportunities following the completion of their education. The primary causes of low employment rates for YADs are limited accessibility to pre-vocational and work opportunities, lack of inclusion, and client specific disability factors.



According to a report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), 21% of adults with disabilities were employed in 2022.

The Primary Causes:

Lack of Accessibility:

- Access to employment is impacted by transportation and limited workplace accommodations (Bal et al., 2021).
- Parents and caregivers face challenges associated with cost and transportation (Ghanouni & Seaker., 2022).

Lack of Inclusion:

- Employer bias impacts YADs employability (Rast et al., 2020).
- An individual's disability and specific disability factors may impact an employer from hiring them (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Disability Factors:

- YADs level of self-esteem can impact employability (Andersen et al., 2018)
- Cognitive and/or physical impairments impact ability to complete work skills

The *HULT* Program Details:

HULT was developed to directly address the significant barriers that impact YADs ability to access employment opportunities. The program takes place across ten weeks and is divided into four modules. Each module contains various employment related topics and correlating activities that promote skill development in each topic area.



The Program Setting:

Within a school based Occupational Therapy (OT) setting, Occupational Therapy Practitioners (OTPs) provide skilled intervention to students targeting the skills required to participate functionally throughout the school day. In high school, students receiving education within self-contained special education classrooms engage in not only academics, but functional life and work skills related tasks. Self-contained programming aims to prepare students for adulthood after high school. These classroom activities in conjunction with OT pre-vocational intervention allow for ample opportunity for students to practice hands-on work skills to prepare them for their future endeavors as an employee.

The Population

YADs who qualify for direct OT service within their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) are the primary population served by the HULT program. It is imperative to address pre-vocational skills earlier, allowing students the opportunity to identify employment interests and begin intervention targeting completing work skills (Lindsay et al., 2021). Parents and caregivers of YADs face barriers related to transportation or being unable to afford the cost of pre-vocational training programs. *HULT* promotes a collaborative environment in which families and students can begin to discuss the crucial elements required for successful employment.

Funding:

- Donations of recyclable grocery containers
- Grants and scholarships from the school district
- Funding from schools' Parent Teacher Organization
- Fundraising from the self-contained Special Education program

The Role of Occupational Therapy:

OTPs have a dynamic role in the school system preparing YADs for employment and life as they transition to adulthood. OTPs may address eight areas of occupation in practice. The relevant occupations addressed in *HULT* include work, education, and social participation. **The overarching goal is to demonstrate the importance of OTP involvement in pre-vocational training for YADs and to implement similar programs in other school-based OT settings.**

References:



Appendix C

Student Pre-Post Test

1	First and Last name
2	Today's date
3	<p>I can identify my personal career/work interests</p> <p>1: I do not know where I want to work</p> <p>2: I can identify one work setting</p> <p>3: I can identify two work settings</p> <p>4: I can identify three work settings</p>
4	<p>I can identify and utilize coping skills in a work setting</p> <p>1: Max assistance (5+ cues/prompts)</p> <p>2: Moderate assistance (3-4 cues/prompts)</p> <p>3: Minimal assistance (1-2 cues/prompts)</p> <p>4: Independently</p>
5	<p>I can complete work tasks</p> <p>1: Max assistance (5+ cues/prompts)</p> <p>2: Moderate assistance (3-4 cues/prompts)</p> <p>3: Minimal assistance (1-2 cues/prompts)</p> <p>4: Independently</p>
6	Identify three work settings of interest:
7	Identify three coping strategies:
8	Identify one work task you can complete effectively:

Appendix D**Parent/Guardian Pre-Post Test**

1	First and Last name
2	Student's First and Last name
3	Today's date
4	My student can identify personal work interests 1: They do not know where they want to work 2: They can identify one work setting 3: They can identify two work settings 4: They can identify three work settings
5	My student can identify and utilize coping strategies in a work setting 1: Max assistance (5+ cues/prompts) 2: Moderate assistance (3-4 cues/prompts) 3: Minimal assistance (1-2 cues/prompts) 4: Independently
6	My student can complete work tasks 1: Max assistance (5+ cues/prompts) 2: Moderate assistance (3-4 cues/prompts) 3: Minimal assistance (1-2 cues/prompts) 4: Independently
7	Identify three work settings that interest your student:
8	Identify three coping strategies your student utilizes:
9	Identify one work task your student can complete effectively:

Appendix E

Program Evaluation Research Questions

Stakeholder Group	Research Questions
Students participating in program	<p><i>Pre-Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which coping skills can you identify that you can utilize in the workplace? • Which areas of employment can you identify as of interest? <p><i>Post-Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What aspects of the program delivery were effective? Group work? Individual work? Videos? Etc. • Which program module was best and why? • What else would you have liked to learn about that was not included in the program? • Which coping skills can you identify that you can utilize in the workplace? • Which work skills have you identify that you have learned to complete during this program? • Which areas of employment can you identify as of interest? • What other comments or concerns would you like to share?
Parents/family of students participating in program	<p><i>Pre-program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From your perspective, how well does your student implement coping skills in their life? • From your perspective, how well does your student complete work tasks? • From your perspective, can your student identify work areas of interest? • What comments and questions do you have about your student's participation in this program? <p><i>Post-program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which aspects of the program did you find meaningful? • Which aspects of the program did you find irrelevant? • Did the school-based program eliminate barriers such as accessibility to pre-vocational programs? • From your perspective, has your student improved in their ability to utilize coping skills? • From your perspective, has your student improved their ability to complete vocational tasks?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• From your perspective, has your student improved their ability to identify areas of employment interest?• What other comments or concerns would you like to share?
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Curriculum Vitae

