

Growing employment skills and expectations for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families: A Project SEARCH Toronto case study

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Abstract: *Introduction:* Young people with disabilities experience significant cultural, educational, and environmental barriers to employment. Project SEARCH is an evidence-based transition-to-work program that prepares youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities for competitive integrated employment (CIE). The current study aims to understand how the Project SEARCH model works by exploring youth and families' perceptions of which elements were meaningful for their learning and employment journeys from a social-relational perspective. *Methods:* We used a descriptive case study approach in which three youth and four family members participated in semi-structured interviews and observations over 19 months. Thematic analysis was used to understand and organize results. *Findings:* Themes related to real-world learning and growth, evolving goals related to CIE and community connection, meaningful relationships with staff, and systemic barriers. The program's impact extends beyond skill development and employment to include important shifts in expectations, confidence, and perceptions of what is possible for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Discussion:* Real-world learning experiences delivered within a supportive environment enhanced youth and families' resilience, confidence, and capacity for employment participation. The findings suggest that the program plays an important role in strengthening the relational and psycho-emotional factors supporting meaningful workforce engagement. We present policy and program considerations for the future. *Conclusion:* The need to expand school-based experiential learning opportunities and enhance support to help prepare youth and families for employment must be paired with broader employment support policies and resources.

Keywords: Vocational rehabilitation, school-to-work transition, disability-inclusive employment, social-relational theory, lived experience perspective.

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Introduction

Employment is a social determinant of health (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008) that has important physical, mental, social, and economic benefits to individuals. However, access to employment is not evenly distributed, and for many individuals, participation remains constrained by structural and social barriers rather than individual capacity alone (Christianson-Barker et al., 2025; Joyce et al., 2025). In Ontario, Canada, employment remains unreachable for many individuals who have stated their desire and intention to participate. Counted among those farthest from the workforce are individuals with disabilities (Caballero & White, 2025), with an employment rate of 59% as compared to the general population at 80% (Morris et al., 2018). For individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, this number is even lower, sitting at 26% (Berrigan et al., 2023).

This study is informed by a social-relational understanding of disability (Thomas, 2007), which conceptualizes disability as arising through the interaction between impairment effects and socially produced forms of disablism. From this perspective, disparities in employment do not simply result from individual limitations or impairment, but can emerge through environmental barriers, institutional practices, and interpersonal dynamics that can restrict equitable participation (Thomas, 2007, 2012). These dynamics include both structural exclusion and psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism. Structural exclusion refers to the ways in which social, institutional, economic, and environmental arrangements have historically and continue to restrict the participation of people with impairments, limiting their access to resources, opportunities, and full social inclusion (Thomas, 2007, 2012). Psycho-emotional disablism is the ways in which social interactions, attitudes, and expectations destabilize the emotional well-being, self-worth, and sense of capability of people with impairments, thereby restricting their participation and shaping their lived experience of disability, elements of which include diminished expectations, stigma, and internalized assumptions about capability (Hernandez-Saca & Cannon, 2016; Thomas, 2007).

Youth have also been identified as an important segment of the Canadian population who face challenges attaining employment. Youth, in greater proportions, are unable to access the social, mental, and financial benefits associated with working (The King's Trust Canada & Deloitte, 2024):

When unemployed, youth cannot develop and grow their skills, and social networks. This results in short-term losses in wages and long-term reductions in their earning potential, referred to as wage scarring. What's more, unemployment has unequivocal negative consequences in terms of mental and physical health and numerous other social impacts. (p.2)

For youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, these challenges are compounded by intersecting forms of marginalization, including ageism, assumptions of inexperience, and expectations of incapacity. Drawing on critical disability studies (Goodley, 2017), these barriers can be understood as rooted in normative assumptions about productivity, independence, and “work-readiness,” which shape how youth are perceived and evaluated within the labour market contexts. Further, an intersectional disability lens (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Hernandez-Saca & Cannon, 2016) highlights that these experiences are not uniform, but mediated by broader social relations, including gender, race, and class, shaping how opportunities and exclusions are differentially experienced.

Connecting both groups, being *youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities*, who want to work with employment participation is best facilitated through start-early opportunities, particularly during high school (Bowman et al., 2023; Mudde et al., 2026; Wehman et al., 2020). Such early, supported, and immersive experiences enable the progressive development of skills in ways that are meaningful and tailored to their ways of being in the world (Bowman et al., 2023) and reduce the risk of long-term labour market exclusion and career scarring (Krahn & Chow, 2016) based on structural exclusion and psycho-emotional disablism. From a social-relational perspective, these early interventions are not only skill-building opportunities but also mechanisms for disrupting disabling social relations by

reshaping expectations, relationships, and access to meaningful participation. The availability of evidence-based programs is therefore essential to supporting more equitable pathways into the workforce for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Bowman et al., 2023; Mudde et al., 2026; Test et al., 2009; Wehman et al., 2020).

Program Context: Project SEARCH Toronto

The current study explored Project SEARCH Toronto as an example of an evidence-based program to support meaningful and tailored school-to-work transition for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Project SEARCH (Project SEARCH, n.d.) is an international transition-to-work program model with over 750 sites in 9 countries. This includes 29 Canadian sites as of September 2025. The model was developed in 1996 at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center as a recruitment and retention strategy for the population that they served but did not see represented in their workforce, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The model immerses youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities in their last year of high school at a host business for 10 months of hands-on work experience combined with employability skills training and career planning (Project SEARCH, n.d.). The program sites run as a collaboration between multiple contributing partners. An education partner oversees youth's completion of high school certification and facilitates the classroom education portions of the curriculum to integrate direct skills teaching with hands-on work experiences. All Project SEARCH programs take place onsite at a host business partner, and youth complete their intensive, immersive internships with the real host business teams. Ideally, a single employment support provider facilitates both skills training and connects youth to real jobs following graduation. The Project SEARCH Toronto site at the time of this study was a collaboration between:

- Co-host business sites: Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital and University Health Network (adjacent facilities and some shared programming)
- Education partner: Toronto District School Board
- Employment support provider: Community Living Toronto (with the option for the youth

and family to choose any Ontario organization post-graduation)

- Funding support agency: United Way of Greater Toronto

We note here that typically Project SEARCH sites have a single host business, but due to proximity and existing collaborations, the two co-hosting healthcare organizations chose to work together.

During the training year, the Project SEARCH Toronto class is resourced with a teacher (or "instructor") and an educational assistant (EA) from our education partner and two skills trainers for a cohort of 10 students, as is recommended practice in the Project SEARCH model. The Toronto site also has two business liaisons affiliated with the business host sites, who happen to be occupational therapists with expertise in transition to employment for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Youth in the program interact and learn from/with all the affiliated staff and liaisons, and do not often distinguish between the staff roles, considering them all as "skills trainers". During a school year, each youth participates in a combination of classroom instruction and three intensive immersive workplace training placements ("internships") to build their employment skills. The internships progressively move them toward their collaboratively identified employment goal by building work-specific competencies and workplace readiness skills that align with Social Development Canada's *Skills for Success* model, and best practices related specifically to employment in the context of disability (Tompkins et al., 2023). Youth are supported by the skills trainers, who provide skills training (akin to job coaching) as needed and help to direct internships so that youth will build industry- and workplace-specific skills and experiences. Youth and families routinely engage in individualized career planning with staff. At the end of the program, youth transition to working with an adult employment support provider in the local community for support with employment start-up and retention.

International program statistics show that 65-70% of Project SEARCH graduates worldwide obtain employment after graduation each year, with ~55% meeting the program-specific definition of employment (internal reporting), which is employment within an integrated setting (co-workers with and without

disabilities) that is year-round (non-seasonal), and 16 hours per week or more with a prevailing wage. These outcomes compare to the 26% Canadian employment rate of adults with severe disabilities in the general population (Berrigan et al., 2023; language chosen by Statistics Canada and not the authors). Canadian graduates from the July 2023-June 2024 work an average of 20 hours/week at \$17.81/hour (Project SEARCH Canada, n.d.), lending to their economic and social stability.

Research Objectives

Project SEARCH demonstrates consistent employment outcomes internationally and the program's core model fidelity criteria represent components common to high-performing sites (Wehman et al., 2020). We know that the Project SEARCH model works. What our team is seeking to understand is how it works. What program elements and lived experiences of the program collaborators contribute to a meaningful and successful program outcome? How do sites navigate pervasive socially produced forms of disablism, impairment effects, and the desire and ability to perform in the workplace that leads to student employment and retention?

In the current study, which is part of a larger case study on the Project SEARCH Toronto site, we explored the lived experiences of youth and families who went through the Project SEARCH program to understand their experiences during and following participation. The research objectives were to:

- Describe youth and family experiences of the Project SEARCH Toronto program.
- Explore whether and how elements of the program were perceived to be impactful by youth and families.

With this information, we will seek to amplify the factors within Project SEARCH that are seen as meaningful and impactful, bolster practices that are not working well, and spread the elements that work to other relevant start-early employment programs.

Methods

A descriptive case study approach combining multiple data collection methods, including interviews and observations, was used to explore the elements of the Project SEARCH Toronto program. Following Yin's methods (2018), a single case study design with multiple embedded subunits of analysis, including youth and families, service providers, and workplace teams, was employed. This approach supported the exploration of complex, real-world phenomena shaped by multiple interacting contextual, relational, and structural factors.

Consistent with a social-relational understanding of disability (Hernandez-Saca & Cannon, 2016; Thomas, 2007, 2012), this study attends to how experiences are produced through interactions between individuals, environments, and social contexts, rather than locating outcomes solely within individual characteristics. To gain an in-depth understanding of youth and family experiences, the current study reports on one embedded subunit of the broader case study. Youth enrolled in Project SEARCH, alongside their primary support persons, represent a key relational unit through which program experiences and outcomes are co-constructed. Our aim was to explore the perspectives of youth and families and gather rich descriptions of their program experiences, including how they understood and interpreted program processes, supports, and outcomes. We reiterate that this represents one subset of the study's full dataset.

Participants and Recruitment

Ethics approval was granted from the involved rehabilitation hospital and school board prior to recruitment. A purposive sampling approach was used, and all youth and families who were part of the 2023–2024 Project SEARCH Toronto cohort were invited to take part in the study. At the beginning of the Project SEARCH school year (September 2023), a staff member contacted youth and their primary support person (e.g., parent) to introduce the study. A research coordinator met with interested youth and families to discuss study details and obtain written consent.

To allow for depth of inquiry and manageability of data within the case study design, we aimed to recruit at least three youth and three family members from the cohort (approximately 30%). This sampling approach is

Table 1: Sample interview questions

Questions were adapted to capture family members and youth perspectives.

Timepoint	Questions and prompts
At program start & during	How has the program been like for you so far? How have you been involved in the program? What made you want to get involved? What do you like about the program? What is working well? (What is an example of that?) What do you not like about the program? What could be done differently? What helps you do a good job? (What is an example of that?) What do you like about your current job (internship)? What do you not like about your current job (internship)? How is Project SEARCH helping you reach your goals as a family? What has been the most helpful for you? What other supports or resources would be helpful for you and your family? What type of jobs are you looking for? (role, location, part-time/full-time) Have you been applying for jobs? How has that felt?
Post-program	What has the program been like for you since graduation? (What updates do you have to share?) How did Project SEARCH help you grow your skills? How did Project SEARCH help you reach your goals? Thinking back over your year in Project SEARCH, what has made the biggest difference for you and your family? (What changes have you noticed?) Looking back, what could have been done differently? <i>For youth who have obtained a job:</i> What do you do at your job? How does it feel to be working at your job? What supports you in your job? And in what ways? (What is an example of that?) What are some challenges? (What is an example of that?)

consistent with qualitative case study methodologies that prioritize depth, relational insight, and contextual understanding over representativeness.

Data Collection

Data collection took place over 19 months to include the Project SEARCH program year (September 2023-June 2024) and nine months following program completion (July 2024-March 2025), allowing for exploration of participants' transitions from school to employment and evolving experiences over time.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the start of the program year, with optional follow-up interviews offered bimonthly throughout the study period. Youth and family members were interviewed together via Zoom, reflecting the relational nature of decision-making, goal-setting, and support within the program context. A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore participants' program experiences, including motivations for joining the program, perceived changes over time, challenges encountered, future goals and aspirations, and factors that supported or constrained participation and outcomes.

Consistent with our social-relational and psycho-emotional lens, interviews also considered how participants described changes in expectations, confidence, sense of possibility, and experiences of support or exclusion within program and workplace contexts (Hernandez-Saca & Cannon, 2016). In interviews conducted following program completion, additional questions explored transitions to employment, employment-related activities, and ongoing structural and relational barriers to participation. Table 1 provides examples of questions from the interview guide. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy by a member of the research team (AO). Participants were assigned a unique code and identifying information was removed or generalized to protect confidentiality.

Direct observations of participants' engagement across program settings (e.g., classroom, internships, and planning or skills training meetings involving youth, families, and staff) were also conducted. Observations in these settings enabled the researchers to examine interactions, supports, and environmental conditions as they unfolded in practice. Rather than focusing on

individual performance, observations were oriented toward understanding how participation was shaped through relationships, supports, expectations, and contextual factors.

An observation template, guided data collection, prompting reflections on the environment, interactions, supports, and moments of change or tension. In keeping with a social-relational approach, particular attention was paid to how inclusion, exclusion, confidence, and participation were produced through interactions and responses from others. To protect privacy, identifying information about individuals not directly involved in the study was not recorded.

All interviews and observations were conducted by the first (AO) or second author (LB), both of whom have training and experience in qualitative data collection methods. Throughout the data collection process, the researchers met regularly to discuss preliminary impressions, emerging patterns, and reflexive considerations.

All discussions and reflections were shared with the wider research/authorship team to gain insights from the varied perspectives that each member offered. Membership expertise includes disability research, employment research, employment supports, education, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Taken together, these discussions illuminated how researcher perspectives and assumptions may shape interpretation, consistent with qualitative rigour, and allowed for reflection on what that might mean for the study interpretations and implications.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) thematic analysis approach, which supports the identification and interpretation of patterns across qualitative data while maintaining flexibility and depth. This approach aligns with a social-relational perspective by allowing for analysis of both individual experiences and the broader relational and structural contexts in which they occur.

Thematic analysis was led by two researchers (AO, LB) with backgrounds in qualitative research, program design and implementation, and transitions to adulthood within rehabilitation contexts. An inductive approach was used to support themes grounded in

participants' accounts while remaining attentive to relational and contextual influences.

The researchers independently reviewed three interview transcripts, and one observation note to generate initial codes. They then met to compare codes, discuss interpretations, and identify features of the data relevant to the research objectives. Codes were refined and organized into a preliminary codebook. After independently applying the codebook to the same transcript, the researchers met to resolve discrepancies through discussion and consensus, clarify code definitions, and refine the coding structure. Codes evolved iteratively to reflect patterns in the data, including those related to perceived changes in confidence, expectations, participation, and support (e.g., "skill growth-navigation", "accommodations-strategies") and were consolidated to reduce redundancy (e.g., the codes "target employers" and "target roles" were combined into a single code, "target employment").

To establish coding consistency, the researchers double-coded three transcripts and one observation note using NVivo 12 Pro. The mean Kappa coefficient was <0.86 , indicating strong agreement (McHugh, 2012), with follow-up discussions confirming shared understanding of the coding framework. Remaining transcripts and observation notes were coded independently.

The researchers then met to examine patterns across the dataset and develop themes aligned with the research objectives. Throughout this process, attention was paid to how experiences were shaped by interactions, supports, expectations, and broader contextual factors, consistent with a social-relational and psycho-emotional perspective.

Methodological rigour was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, reflexivity, and ongoing documentation of analytic decisions and interpretations through memos. This process enhanced transparency and supported critical examination of how meanings were constructed within the analysis. These practices also align with qualitative rigour best practices, including Nowell et al.'s (2017) concepts of trustworthiness and Tracy's (2010) Big Tent criteria for qualitative research.

Results

In total, three youth and four family members participated in the study. Two youth were female, and one youth was male. All three youth have developmental disabilities and one also has a physical impairment and uses a mobility device to participate in daily activities. All youth have limited literacy and numeracy skills and have families who are involved in their education and employment seeking. All participants live within commuting distance of the Project SEARCH Toronto program. One youth had previous paid work experience, but not in an inclusive workplace setting. Two youth were connected to the primary employment support provider following graduation, and one was connected to a different provider.

To support privacy, participants were renamed using codes (Y# for youth, P# for parent, and S# for sibling). In total, 12 interviews were conducted. One youth-parent dyad participated in five interviews (Y3 and P3). One youth-parent dyad took part in two interviews (Y2 and P2). One youth (Y1) took part in five interviews, including three interviews with a parent (P1) and two with an older sibling (S1), respectively. Interviews ranged from 21 to 62 minutes. 19 observation sessions included three classroom sessions, three internship sessions, eight employment planning meetings, and five post-program skills training sessions. Examples of how data from multiple sources were converged in the analysis are shown in Table 2.

Our analysis generated four themes related to youth and family experiences and perceived impacts with accompanying subthemes:

- *Real-world learning and growth*: Participants experienced personal growth through real-world opportunities, challenges, and consequences based on interactions with the new working environments and social contexts.
- *Goal fluidity*: Participants' goals were shaped by what they learned and experienced throughout the program and were related to competitive integrated employment (CIE) and community connection, along with experiences of psycho-emotional disability and structural exclusion/inclusion.

Table 2: Examples of data triangulation across data sources (interviews, observations, and reflections)

Theme	Interviews quotes	Excerpts from observation notes	Excerpts from reflection notes
Real-world learning and growth	“He gets there actually early. Being responsible on time, being responsible on you know, like I said, getting your job and doing your job. Like he had some problems when he was at Project SEARCH there were some little iffy things, but I think he overcame those and he learned that in real life, you can't be putting the earbuds in your ears and you can't be doing, job is job.” (P3)	On his way out of the elevator, [job coach] runs into Y1 who says she was looking for him. Due to renovations, the room she was going to clean is closed. [Job coach] asks, “What did you do yesterday?” He prompts Y1 to look at her schedule in a binder on her cart. He then prompts her to turn the page to find yesterday's schedule.	The students are treated as employees, with high expectations for their behavior in the classroom (e.g., text if you are late) and in the workplace. They are required to understand and adhere to policies and standards.
Goal fluidity	“I want her to be engaged... not only, you know, being stuck inside the home.” (P2)	[Job coach] asks P1: “Do you see paid work as a major part of that? Do you also see volunteering? Social activities? What is the big picture and what else is on your mind and how does paid work fit into that?” P1 replies that “Volunteering is okay. Just don't want her to stay home after graduation, want opportunity to get into the community.”	The family's hope is for youth to become engaged in the community including part-time work after high school. Y1's goals include working, learning how to work, and meeting new people. Y1 “loves everything” about her placement and like other youth, mentioned enjoying the social aspect of work and being with people.
Beyond rapport	We signed up for other organizations, but none of them have been as supportive, but it's more like one-time meetings. Whereas I feel like Project SEARCH, [staff member], you guys really know [Y1] and our family, so I think that helps a lot. (S1)	[Job coach] provides a link to another theatre with a passion for accessibility. She says, “It's great to have meetings to keep generating ideas together. P1 replies, “this has been a helpful discussion, looking for leads, especially places that have already hired people with disabilities.”	Everyone plays a role in helping the student find a job. Students and families feel continuously supported.
Systemic barriers	“A lot of these employers don't have the understanding that people with disabilities	P2 tells [job coach] that the employment agency “hasn't made any progress yet”. She explains that the service	The [job coaches] acknowledged how complex the system is. Questions were raised about the [social

need a little bit more time and training.” (P2)

provider working with Y2 is on leave and, “[Family] is not sure who will take over.”

assistance funding] application process, [government funded] day program spots, fee-for-service day program spots, and the possibility of ongoing employment supports in adulthood. A lot of information was presented that could be overwhelming for families, however P2 did appear more appreciative than overwhelmed.

- *Beyond rapport*: Participants made meaningful connections with staff and valued the personalized job supports they received during the program that promoted their understanding of how they were ‘able’ and capable within the current systems and structures.
- *Systemic barriers*: After the program, participants experienced ongoing employment and transition related needs.

know this way. Independently or being by herself and going traveling, also dealing or talking with other people.

Over time, family members observed youth engaging in opportunities that facilitated skill development and personal growth. For example, as access to transportation can be a significant barrier to employment and community participation, transit training is a required element of Project SEARCH programs. Youth are expected to travel independently (with supports as appropriate) to the training location. Initially skeptical, family members were pleasantly surprised when youth were able to meet goals related to transportation and independence. As P3 shared:

There was actually a point I almost actually took him out of the program because I thought I’m not going to put him on a bus... I don’t know where he is, if he’s ever going to come home. But he did it and he proved me completely wrong.

Parents also recognized the value of allowing youth to take risks when they can be confident about the support available in the environment, “she has to be left by herself to do things by herself, but there was no opportunity where we can do it in a safe way” (P2). Furthermore, parents learned that their youth were capable of problem-solving in the face of real, unexpected challenges when given the opportunity. As P1 shared about Y1’s experiences with transportation:

In the past, we never knew she can take the [BUS SERVICE] by herself, every time she has a program, we always bring her there... She takes

Theme 1: Real-world Learning and Growth

Building Parent Expectations

Throughout the program, parents discussed building their own expectations for their youth. Parents identified several existing challenges and areas of growth for youth, including managing daily activities, socializing and communicating with others, and problem-solving. This theme reflects parents’ acknowledgement and apprehension towards structural barriers and structural exclusion, while exploring the journey of understanding and grappling with their own ableism and disablism.

Although parents were excited by the program’s unique learning opportunities tailored to youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, they were initially apprehensive about their youth’s ability to be successful during and after the program. As P2 shared:

I also hesitated, I don’t know if this is going to be more pressure on her or if [Y2] will handle it, because this is demanding a lot from her. Before this program, she was not doing things like, you

[BUS SERVICE] independently. Sometimes because she's sleeping, she misses the bus stop, so sometimes she can also handle that, she can get off and ask someone how to get back home. (P1)

Overall, the program allowed parents to gain insights into what youth could achieve with the provision of support and parents' challenging of their own psycho-emotional disabling attitudes and expectations. Furthermore, youth often outperformed their parents' initial expectations. As expressed by P2, "I do feel sometimes if [Y2] hadn't done this program, and she was like going to school, I would not even know what she can do. What is she capable of doing."

Real-World Consequences

Youth and parents also described experiences of learning in real-world situations with real consequences. Through classroom lessons and internships, youth learned that work settings have different behavioural expectations than school. Through real-world experiences, interactions, and relations, along with the mistakes and consequences that came with them, the youth developed professional behaviours (e.g., limiting phone use) and workplace standards (e.g., maintaining an expected pace of work to maintain the job) that they carried forward. For instance, P2 noted, "[Y2] had to learn that behaviour to show up at her work on time."

P3 and Y3 discussed facing the often-harsh realities of the world of work. Following a workplace incident on his third internship that strained his relationship with his workplace mentor, Y3 feared that he would lose his spot in the program. Program staff took this seriously and discussed with the family how Y3's ability to continue his internship would be in jeopardy if his quality of work did not improve. As P3 shared:

[SKILLS TRAINER] had to basically retrain him... To be honest with you, I thought they were going to kick him out of the program. They retrained him and then it seemed like everything, you know, was fine after that, right? So, I think it's just a lesson learned... I regret not challenging [Y3] as much as I should have, right? And babying [Y3]. It doesn't work. And I, that's why I think that this program is beautiful.

When describing the situation, Y3 expressed that initially he felt like "giving up and saying there is no point of trying to change anything because that big problem happened," but eventually learned to keep trying and "ask for help" rather than ignoring problems or difficult situations in the workplace. Y3 continued to face ongoing challenges with working independently and following rules, and he required ongoing check-ins and reminders of workplace expectations and consequences. These hard-earned lessons helped Y3 prepare for the job he obtained after the program ended. When discussing Y3's transition to employment, P3 shared:

He gets there actually early. Being responsible on time, being responsible on you know, like I said, getting your job and doing your job. Like he had some problems when he was at Project SEARCH there were some little iffy things, but I think he overcame those and he learned that in real life, you can't be putting the earbuds in your ears and you can't be doing, job is job.

When reflecting back at the end of the year, Y3 shared that he had done "a lot of maturing" and gained both "hard skills" and "soft skills" to apply in his current job, "[Project SEARCH] helped me get the skills that I needed for what I'm doing now."

The consideration of real-world consequences allowed participants to consider the lines between ability, impairment, disability, and the structures in which youth and families interact. Youth learned about the structural and job requirements, and relational expectations of the workplace, and how their abilities and impairments might shape how they adapted to the required versus preferred elements of workplace performance, culture, and expectation.

Environment Built for Growth

Parents discussed that they found the program setting to be different from their youth's previous school experiences. It offered an environment built for growth that pushed youth beyond their comfort zones. They appreciated the program's specific focus on helping youth acquire practical work life skills that they described as preparing them for the real-world. As P1 shared, "Project SEARCH teaches [Y1] real life, like how to make a resume, money, financial, like, timing, those things, kind of real-life skills, that she can learn how to follow the rules as well." Parents expressed that youth

would have benefited from more experiential learning opportunities during their prior school experiences. There was a common belief that the youth's traditional school settings were enjoyable and comfortable for youth, and such comfort did not foster the development of skills for everyday life. As P2 expressed:

And you know, the main reality of life is that they have to face one day, right? To come out of the protective environment... they might need some hand or a little bit pushed to actually do something, rather than only sitting in the classroom. And then just having a lot of help around them and then not facing any challenges... instead of only documenting, in the reports and making it a target that we will do it, but actually it never happened because you're not actually doing it.

Parents felt that the structure of the Project SEARCH Toronto program was effective in preparing youth for the transition to adult life, when school-based resources would no longer be available. Skills trainers faded support over time, which facilitated growth in youth's motivation for work and self-determination. P3 shared:

Going through the school system, he had things easy you know, like he had always an EA [educational assistant] beside him, all his work was modified to his level ... You know, it's [Project SEARCH Toronto] made him more aware that it's not just sitting down and asking the EA to basically do your own work for your kind of thing, right?

While 'adult life' implies a normative transition towards financial and personal independence that may not be a goal for some youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, there are structural realities that will impact the youth and their families as they transition out of the publicly funded school system. Through exploring environments built for growth, parents and youth had the opportunity to consider what the youth could and would like to work towards in their post-school trajectories and do so in an environment that is understanding of structural barriers and exclusionary practices, as well as how to build inclusive and capacity-focused attitudes for the youth, families, and those in their work environments.

Theme 2: Goal Fluidity

Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)

At the start of the program, participants shared many goals for the future related to growing their confidence and independence in life skills and employment participation. Initial goals shared by youth included "learn something new", "learn how to work" and "meet new people." However, goals were fluid and influenced by participants' interactional and relational program experiences.

The Project SEARCH model holds an expected program outcome of CIE after graduation. During their internships, youth progressively discovered their strengths and interests and clarified potential future roles and employers. For example, Y3 expressed a desire for a job similar to roles that he had during the program. His vision for the future included permanent full-time work, "I'd say full day. Every day. Every Monday to Friday." P3 added that this vision had changed as Y3 learned what he was capable of doing through his internship experiences. After graduation, Y3 obtained a paid-part time job, and the family acknowledged it was an important step towards Y3's ultimate goal of full-time employment.

Participants valued having daily opportunities to be engaged and productive after graduation. As S1 shared regarding job searching with Y1:

Yeah, to be honest, hoping for full-time hours... I do notice [Y1] we talked about the Project SEARCH when she was going to Project SEARCH and co-op every day, that was when we felt [Y1] was most fulfilled and thriving and healthy, right? A lot of walking too. Now it's more at home. Right? So, I think you like being busy, right? And working. Yeah, so that's still the ultimate goal to full-time shift, full-time hours.

Community Connection

Participants also valued the growth in opportunities for engagement beyond competitive integrated employment (CIE). Based on their increased social, community integration, and productive skills built through self-discovery and internship, family members and youth formed broader post-program goals related to lifelong learning, belonging and community connection. As P1 reflected:

At the very beginning, I said okay, based on this [PROGRAM] maybe finding a job is successful. But now I don't, I changed my mind. As long as [Y1] enjoys this [PROGRAM], learning something from this program, I think it is successful. Yeah also, making some friends.

Sharing this sentiment, P2's definition of a successful outcome shifted throughout the program as she observed Y2 navigate the community and participate in the workplace with greater independence. The family hoped that Y2 would be able to continue to be involved in the community whether it be through paid work or volunteering opportunities. P2 shared that she didn't want Y2 "cut off from the outside world. I want her to be engaged... not only, you know, being stuck inside the home." Discussions like these demonstrated families' value of what was meaningful for their youth and building consideration for both normative (employment) and non-normative (community interaction, broader social connections) ways to achieve a meaningful adulthood through their program interactions.

Youth shared these goals for belonging and connection and strived to "work with people", "learn how to work and meet new people" and "interact with others." After the program, S1 noted that Y1 felt "fulfillment" and "proud to belong somewhere and have a job." Overall, the program helped shape participants' visions for their futures and opened up new possibilities. As Y3 shared after graduation, his ultimate goal for the future was not only securing a full-time job, but also living independently, "getting a house, moving by myself."

Theme 3: Beyond Rapport

Gratitude and Connection

Parents and youth expressed gratitude and connection with program staff. All participants expressed a level of familiarity with staff and agreed that they felt supported as they worked towards their goals. This finding aligns with our growing understanding of staff's role and value as part of the social-relational connections and processes within the Project SEARCH model and reversing existing impacts of psycho-emotional disablism. When asked about the most meaningful aspect of her overall Project SEARCH Toronto experience, Y1 expressed it was the skills training that helped her feel more "confident" and less "nervous". S1 added:

The job coaching is most helpful... I know that [STAFF MEMBER] has been always trying hard to find different companies that hire and like building connections with them too, so that's been really helpful and just moral support, the support along the way too.

Y2 also shared that the most helpful aspect of the program was having a skills trainer to teach her new tasks and responsibilities. She valued having a skills trainer demonstrate and "explaining the job" and noted that the skills trainer was someone she could turn to for support, "and if I don't understand, I'll ask [SKILLS TRAINER] any questions." In addition to providing ongoing support and guidance, program staff built trusting relationships with families. For example, staff helped Y3 persevere through a particularly difficult time in the program. As shared by P3, "it made [Y3] upset and he wanted to give up, to be honest with you... But they didn't give up. They put him somewhere [new placement] and you know they took the time and patience with him and I'm very grateful for that." Y3 agreed, expressing that "it felt good" having staff believe in him.

Personalization and Knowing

Participants attributed much of their success in the program to personalization and feeling that staff truly knew the youth and families. Through ongoing discussion and interactions, staff gained a deep understanding of each youth's strengths and needs, as well as the type of roles in which they would be most successful. These insights helped staff, parents, and youth develop and work towards desired and realistic goals. Skills trainers took a personalized, hands-on approach to job searching. In one example, a skills trainer identified that Y2 may be a good fit for entry level library roles based on her strengths and interests (e.g., greeting and directing patrons). Before applying for roles, the skills trainer explored if and how Y2 could perform tasks in a real library setting via role play, including navigating the space with a mobility device. This helped the family and staff envision realistic employment opportunities aligned with Y2's interests and abilities, including what types of accommodation would be needed. Y2 shared that she was motivated by this experience to search for a library or similar role. She stated, "If I can do something there like arranging books.

My chair can go up, so I can put books on the shelf, arranging books in order.”

When supporting Y1 in job searching after the program, S1 also shared that their family felt cared for and encouraged by program staff. In contrast with other service providers, she felt that they had developed a meaningful relationship with Project SEARCH staff who had come to truly understand her family’s needs and goals for future employment. S1 shared that:

We signed up for other organizations, but none of them have been as supportive, but it’s more like one-time meetings. Whereas I feel like Project SEARCH, [staff member], you guys really know [Y1] and our family, so I think that helps a lot.

This subtheme highlights the importance of both support (as opposed to an environment of marginalization and disablism) and the power of relational interactions in also producing opportunities for growth, confidence, and self-belief.

Skills Training for Youth and Environment

Participants discussed experiences of skills training for youth and the environment. Family members shared that they valued program staff’s expertise in supporting inclusive and meaningful learning and employment opportunities. As shared by P2, “I got interested because when I first learned about this program and what this program offers, and especially the way it has been designed for children with special needs.” Participants appreciated that workplace accommodations and skills training materials were personalized to youth’s individual needs and skills. Youth shared that they learned strategies that helped them do their best work, such as following a conversation script, setting alarms to follow schedules, and checklists to assess quality of work.

Participants also described how staff supported them in setting up the environment for success. For example, staff supported S1 in creating a skills training document for Y1 to implement in a paid job that she obtained after graduation. Y1 used the document to introduce herself and share her strengths and challenges with co-workers. This document, along with a skills trainer for job start-up, led to a supportive working environment. As S1 shared, “[SKILLS TRAINER] was helpful in advocating for [Y1] and

yeah, being able to like telling people what [Y1] needs and how she learns best. So that was important.”

In addition to supports in the workplace, participants valued the support they received around navigating the transition to the adult system. Family members described receiving help with applying and connecting with various adult services including attendant care services and government funding and supports. Participants were also warned to be prepared for a reduction in services after the program where resources like skills training may become less consistent or scarce. This helped provide a more realistic view and plan for life after Project SEARCH.

Participant reflections highlight that despite the myriad structural barriers and exclusions that exist, helpful and personalized practices and strengths-focused relational interactions can be effective in supporting meaningful employment opportunities.

Theme 4: Systemic Barriers

Remaining Needs

After graduation, participants reported facing several systemic barriers, both within and beyond the broader lack of youth employment opportunities. Ongoing needs included available public support with navigating resources (in Ontario, available support changes upon existing public education/pediatric systems), access to social assistance funding, and assistance with disability-based employment barriers. Notably, two of the three youth in this study with strong family involvement still required personalized, ongoing job coaching after graduation. S1 acknowledged that youth were entering an especially challenging labour market, stating, “After [Y1] graduated, this is when I got more involved helping her apply for jobs. It’s really, really hard. I know the economy sucks. But just, it’s very hard to find a job.”

Some families faced disability discrimination during the job search process. One family encountered employers who were “scared of being liable for something” or hesitant to provide training” (P1). Another family felt that “a lot of these employers don’t have the understanding that people with disabilities need a little bit more time and training” (P2). For one position, S1 recalled challenges during the interview, that they shared:

After that not very accommodating interview, where [INTERVIEWER] only addressed me, they told us that [Y1] wasn't a good fit. Even though we found them at [INCLUSIVE JOB FAIR]... I replied asking like, what is she not meeting right? Like [INTERVIEWER] says she's not meeting expectations... they didn't really give me an explanation.

S1 continued to advocate for Y1, and she was ultimately successful in obtaining the role. Y1's dedication and customer service skills proved to be beneficial for the position, and the family described the work environment as positive and welcoming. Y1 shared that the role made her feel "good" and "independent".

In contrast, Y2 did not obtain a targeted role to facilitate her transition into the workforce. One barrier for a target organization of hers was their immunization requirements, which she could not fulfill for medical reasons. The family received support from Project SEARCH staff to navigate this complex issue; however, they were unable to reach a resolution. The family searched for opportunities elsewhere, including adult day programs where Y2 could continue to build on skills within the program, and "socialize, learn independence, and travel by herself." Due to ongoing family circumstances and low levels of job-searching success, there was little follow-up on her job attainment.

Intensity of Employment Supports

Family members also noted a marked decrease in the intensity of publicly available employment supports after graduation. One family experienced a gap in services when transitioning from Project SEARCH to their community-based employment support provider. P2 desired more clarity about the role of the employment supports provider and was unsure of "how they will be able to help." When asked about anticipated needs moving forward, P1 wondered about continuity of services, "I was curious how long... but like the support is it, like in the future can we ask for help?"

Suggestions for Improvement

Family members made suggestions for improvement focused primarily on systemic issues and system change. One suggestion included increasing awareness of the "life-changing" program and making it easier for families

who are often overwhelmed with navigating programs and services. As P2 shared:

There is not a lot of information available. Or not a lot of awareness around it. Families who have special children, they might be looking forward to something like this but unfortunately even the school was not able to give me any information about it.

Having observed the benefits and outcomes of the Project SEARCH model first-hand, all families shared that they wanted the program to start earlier and be available to more youth. As stated by P3:

It's a great program for kids with disabilities to learn how to get a job. And it should be more funded. [Y3] went to a school full of kids with disabilities. There are 200 kids in there and they all have some kind of a disability. And the parents keep them there till they're 21. Instead of doing that, put them in a program like Project SEARCH ... into an adult environment and teaching them and maturing them into adult life... So, I think the government, school boards, should figure out what these kids to not, not the last year of school when they're 20. Prepare them before that.

Discussion

Based on in-depth observation and interviews with youth and family members who participated in the Project SEARCH Toronto school-to-work transition program, this study found strength in real-world learning, goal fluidity, and strong rapport built through the program. From a social-relational perspective (Thomas, 2007), these elements can be understood as mechanisms that interrupt disabling social relations by reshaping expectations, opportunities, and interactions around youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In particular, we note the importance of parents and youth expecting employment as an outcome. Holding expectations for employment or even recognizing employment as a possibility was a new concept for some participants. This shift reflects not only growing skills, but also a transformation in the relational and psycho-emotional dimensions of disability, including changes in confidence, perceived capability, and future orientation (Hernandez-Saca & Cannon, 2016).

The fluidity of goals related to employment shared by families was necessary as understanding of youth's abilities evolved over time. Consistent with critical disability studies (Goodley, 2017), these findings highlight how assumptions about capacity and "readiness" are not fixed but are socially produced and can shift through experience and support. Having meaningful supporters who expect employment is an important element in connecting youth to the workforce (Bowman, 2023; Liu, 2014; Wehman, 2015; Larson, 2019). By applying a perspective of fluidity to goals over the course of the program, families and youth can recalibrate expectations in response to emerging abilities and opportunities. This process can be understood as countering psycho-emotional disablism, where lowered expectations and internalized limitations are replaced with more expansive and affirming understandings of what is possible.

The growth in ability and expectation is further supported by the personalization of youth's progression at the boundary between real-world experience and structured ('errorless') learning. The Project SEARCH model of skills training includes systematic instruction (Wehman et al., 2014), which emphasizes guided learning and error minimization. However, participants' experiences suggest that the value of the program lies not only in skill acquisition, but in how learning is relationally supported. Despite the use of errorless learning approaches, mistakes and consequences remained part of real-world participation. The ability of the Project SEARCH Toronto team to respond to these moments by rallying around youth, supporting correction, and maintaining inclusion was critical. From a social-relational lens, these responses can be understood as mitigating the psycho-emotional impacts of failure, such as shame or exclusion, and instead fostering belonging, resilience, and sustained participation. These findings underscore the importance of relational forms of support that extend beyond formal training models to include trust, responsiveness, and what may be understood as forms of relational accessibility (Christianson-Barker et al., 2025).

The findings were situated within broader systemic barriers and unmet needs outlined in the results section. Barriers related to education, funding, and the availability of employment supports continued to shape outcomes, regardless of program model or efficacy. In particular, reduced employment supports following

program completion reflect wider structural changes in Ontario's employment services sector. Caballero and White (2025) highlight that the province's introduction of the Integrated Employment Services system is associated with below-average long-term employment outcomes for both youth and persons with disabilities. These system-level challenges point to the persistence of structural disablism, where institutional arrangements and policy decisions constrain opportunities for equitable participation (Joyce et al., 2025; Thomas, 2012). They also reflect broader tensions within neoliberal policy contexts, where responsibility for labour market participation is often individualized, while structural supports remain insufficient.

Importantly, our findings suggest that while systemic barriers remain significant, the program plays a critical role in reshaping relational and psycho-emotional conditions that influence workforce participation. Youth and families described increased knowledge, confidence, and expectations regarding employment, alongside resilience built through real-world learning in a supportive environment. These findings reinforce that employment outcomes are not solely determined by skills or qualifications, but are co-produced through interactions between individuals, support systems, and broader socio-economic structures. The impact of positive staff relationships further highlights how inclusion is enacted through everyday interactions, where youth are supported, believed in, and positioned as capable contributors.

Limitations

Our study's generalizability is limited by a small, self-selected sample size. In alignment with a case study methodology, we aimed to accurately represent participants' perspectives via in-depth interviews and rich observations over time, recognizing that experiences of disability and inclusion are contextually and relationally produced. As such, findings may not reflect the experiences of all Project SEARCH participants or sites. Rather than generalizability, these findings offer analytically transferable insights into how relational, structural, and psycho-emotional dimensions of disability operate within a specific program context.

Implications for Research, Practice and Policy

Youth and families identified a need for greater employment support following program graduation.

From a social-relational perspective, this highlights a critical discontinuity between supportive program environments and broader systems that shape labour market participation. While Project SEARCH effectively fosters skills, confidence, and expectations, these gains may be undermined if post-program environments do not sustain relational and structural supports.

Within the context of Project SEARCH programs, best practice emphasizes transition into the workplace while still connected to supports. Extending this approach across programs may help bridge the gap between skill development and sustained employment. Beyond skill acquisition, findings suggest the importance of preparing youth and families for navigating systemic barriers, including access to funding and employment services. Supporting families to anticipate and respond to these broader conditions may strengthen longer-term outcomes.

At a policy level, findings reinforce the importance of continuing to implement and expand experiential learning programs such as Project SEARCH within school systems. However, from a critical disability studies perspective, such efforts must be accompanied by systemic change to ensure that responsibility for employment outcomes is not placed solely on individuals and programs. Greater attention to the role of family involvement, the structure of post-program supports, and the adequacy of employment services systems is needed to create more equitable conditions for workforce participation.

Future research should continue to examine how contextual and systemic variables influence outcomes across sites. Longitudinal research exploring long-term employment participation would further illuminate how early program experiences interact with broader structural conditions over time.

Conclusion

The subset of our broader case study provides insight into the experiences of youth and families who participated in the Project SEARCH Toronto program, foregrounding the relational and contextual factors that shape participation and outcomes. Findings illustrate that program impact extends beyond skill development to include important shifts in expectations, confidence, and perceptions of what is possible for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These

changes reflect transformations in the psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism, as youth and families moved from uncertainty or limited expectations toward greater confidence, agency, and future orientation.

Key program elements (immersive real-world learning opportunities, fluidity of goals in response to emerging strengths, and strong, supportive relationships with staff) were central to these shifts. From a social-relational perspective, these elements function not only as program features but as mechanisms that disrupt disabling social relations by fostering inclusion, belonging, and meaningful participation.

At the same time, findings highlight the persistence of structural exclusion, particularly in relation to gaps in employment supports and broader policy contexts that shape access to work following program completion. While Project SEARCH Toronto contributes to enhanced readiness and confidence, youth and families continue to navigate systems that may not fully sustain these gains.

Overall, this study underscores that successful transitions to employment are co-produced through interactions between individuals, relationships, program supports, and broader structural conditions. Efforts to improve employment outcomes for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities must therefore extend beyond program-level interventions to include sustained relational support and systemic change that addresses both structural and psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism.

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