

THE OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES OF SCHOOL PATHS OF FINNISH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY (ID)

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Abstract

The experiences and perceptions that people with intellectual disability (ID) who have participated in vocational education have about their study paths is a less studied theme in Finland and also internationally. The purpose of this research was to find out whether their transitions from basic education to vocational education have been successful in their opinion and how their parents perceived the study paths. The purpose of this research was to analyze the study paths of young adults with ID and their school experiences as described by themselves and their parents. The focus was on memories of basic education, transition to vocational education, and studies at the vocational special education school. The research participants comprised 14 young adults with ID (aged 17-23, 10 boys and 4 girls) and their parents (N= 14). They all had personal study plans in basic education, and except for one, they all had completed basic education according to their study plans. The research leaned on the narrative research approach. The youngsters and their parents were interviewed personally in 2012 and 2014. The study paths of young people with ID could be grouped into three narratives: the fluent, complex, and interrupted study paths. Study success in young people with ID is a sum of many factors. The study illustrates four core factors directing the study processes: the student, school community, curriculum, and teacher. In addition, support from home is extremely important to the fluency of study paths. The purpose of education should be to prepare train, rehabilitate, and guide students with ID into good life that includes work, health, and relationships. Based on this study, educational options for people with ID are limited and should be developed so that secondary education would educate future experts to work markets and promote learning and societal participation in the young who need special support.

Key words: intellectual disability, narrative research, vocational special education, personal study plan, study path.

Introduction

Right to education has been considered a core element of the equal opportunities to have a good life in people with intellectual disability (ID). Education is an important means of enhancing youngsters' and adults' participation in society, and increasing their standard of living, and preventing isolation from society. Instead of segregating special education arrangements, the current Finnish basic education and vocational special education emphasizes inclusive practices (Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2014). However in practice, the application processes, lack of educational options, and location of schooling institutions limit and direct study paths of youngsters with ID. They have considerably weaker chances of educating themselves after basic education than their other peers have (Hermanoff, 2016).

The development of special education for people with ID reflects changes in society, work, and technology. From care and provision the focus has been directed in active agency and worker citizenship. Instead of predetermined, invariable education, it is essential to pay attention to the changing nature of education system and respond to changes with flexible and individually designed study paths.

Various transitions in study paths and in life in general are processes that precede a new, structurally different phase of life. Transitions are seen as multidimensional processes in which individual persons' skills and interaction with environment (family, peers, services) are significant (Floyd, Costigan, & Piazza, 2009). A transition is a multi-faceted concept that covers educational transitions, transition to work, and various transitions defining adulthood (Wehmeyer & Webb, 2012). Transition phases are important to development because they make it possible to gain the physical, social, and mental independence and responsibility over one's own life (Swedeen, Carter, & Molfenter, 2010).

In sum, people with ID are provided with such basic and vocational education that aims at meeting their needs and supporting their life management skills. Questions of how education should be organized or what kinds of emphasis it should have, have been studied abundantly. Various developmental programs and plans and their usefulness have already been studied, and especially special education teachers have been able to present their opinions and evaluations of the state and developmental needs of special education (see e.g., Wehmeyer, 2015). But what kinds of experiences and perceptions do people with ID who have participated in education have about their study paths and factors promoting or slowing down them? How successful transitions have been in their opinion, and how does the study path seem when transferring from basic education to vocational education? It is also important to hear their parents' voices because the parents have often the best viewpoint to the process. This research looks for answers to these questions. When we know more about the thoughts and experiences of people with ID and of their parents, we are able to develop their study paths and enhance the smoothness of studies.

Functional Approach to Intellectual Disability

The definition of disability and understanding of its societal role have been further advanced by research on ID and theoretical models of ID that are especially presented by activists speaking for the rights of people with ID. The core question is whether ID is a personal feature or a problem caused by society and whether people with ID are considered targets of action and control or human beings whose needs should be met and rights protected (Gustavsson, 2004; Katsui, 2005; Shakespeare, 2006; Smart, 2009).

The Social Model of Disability has highlighted the physical and social habits connected to society and an individual person's living environment that either integrate or isolate people with ID (Shakespeare, 2006). The social model does not deny the existence of disability but it does not perceive disability as the reason for societal and social positioning people with ID in a certain manner. The model helps recognizing inaccessible structures of society pursuing to create practices and policies that dismantle these structures (Barnes, 2012; Oliver & Barnes, 2010).

American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) has developed a model of intellectual disability that views it from a functional viewpoint. The model defines ID based on a human being's personal abilities and as a dynamic relationship with his or her environment. It outlines the need for support and its influence on the person's functional ability at five dimensions that are intellectual skills, adaptive behavior, health, participation, and functional environment (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010; Luckasson & Schalock, 2013). Functional ability and its limitations are seen as a multidimensional, interactional, and dynamic state. In addition, the definition of ID considers the societal influence of the environment in one's life (Bickenbach, 2012; McEarthon & Beuhring, 2011). At the same time, the evaluation of ID has

changed from intelligence quotient to measurements of functional abilities (AAIDD, 2010; Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman, & Anastasiow, 2012; Parmenter, 2011).

In the AAIDD model, ID is viewed support-paradigmatically and in relation to one's functional ability. The idea of support paradigm is based on changing attitudes to intellectual disability (Shogren et al., 2009) and on demand that services should be arranged primarily by focusing on equality and human rights (Katsui, 2005; Ladonlahti, 2004). The AAIDD model is widely accepted and various support, service, and benefits practices have been designed based on it (Riches et al., 2009).

Paying attention to the need of individualized support enhances the independence and integration to society in people with ID (Wehmeyer et al., 2008) and strengthen their opportunities to participate in decision-making regarding issues concerning themselves and their lives (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010; Luckasson & Schalock, 2013). Support services that pay attention to people's strengths instead of weaknesses can improve their functional abilities (Schalock, 2011; Wehmeyer et al., 2008).

Difficulties in cognitive, social, and everyday life skills also make educational transitions challenging (Floyd et al., 2009; Glidden, Ludvig, & Grein, 2012; Haber, Karpur, Deschenes, & Clark, 2008). Especially those youngsters who have plenty of needs for support, transition to vocational education and work requires considerably individual guidance, support, and planning.

The study path of a person with ID can be seen as a process in which his or her personal choices, points of interest, and needs are molded within a ready-set structures of special education. For example in Finland, they can have voluntary extra education or vocational education after completing their compulsory basic education.

The Capabilities Theory

Capabilities refer to human beings' opportunities of leading a meaningful, rich, and authentic life. Fundamentally, capabilities mean people's basic right to choose their way of being (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2008). On the other hand, freedom and choices define the frame of a good life (Johnson, Walmsley, & Wolfe, 2010). Martha Nussbaum has adopted the paradigm of human development according to which developmental opportunities in various areas of life are what matter. These areas of life are, for example, health, physical integrity, political participation, and education. Capabilities comprise of individual aptitudes and environmental conditions (Hakala, 2010). Agency requires not only inner capabilities but also benign conditions and material resources (Nussbaum, 2009; 2011).

Well-being is at the core of the capabilities theory. Well-being is considered as the individual person's goal and the societal goal, and it is dependent on natural and societally arranged opportunities and conditions of doing those things the person values (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993). Well-being is constructed by achieved functioning and opportunities of doing and being (Robneys, 2005; Sen, 2008). Lorella Terzi's (2010) thinking follows Nussbaum's idea of the meaning of capabilities in equal participation. According to Terzi, ID does not mean the disability itself but incapability it causes because one cannot change one's resources into capabilities. It is necessary to pay attention to inequality that stems from the disability itself and that is strengthened by the physical and social environment. A functional and equal society notices the meaning of risk factors that accumulate the infortune and provides support that strengthen capabilities. A valuable life and idea of dignity emerge when one sees oneself as a meaningful and appreciated part of the group.

Research Focus and Problem of Research

Research on school paths among young people with ID is scarce, and therefore, to improve their education, it is necessary to research their study experiences. The problem of

the research focused on the study paths and factors enhancing their smoothness. Thus, the aim of this research was to analyze the study paths of young adults with ID and their school experiences as described by themselves and their parents. The focus was on memories of basic education, transition to vocational education, and studies at the vocational special education school. The following research questions were set for this research:

- (1) What is the study path of a young person with ID like?
- (2) What kinds of factors enhance the smoothness of the study path?
- (3) What do the study paths of the young persons with ID differ from each other?

Methodology of Research

General Description

The research leaned on the narrative research approach because it provided a way to use the young people's narratives as data. Narrative research tends to give voice to the narrator (see Bruner, 2004; Webster & Mertova, 2007), which means that the narratives provided by the young people with ID describe their own experiences and perceptions (see Frank, 2012). In an emancipatory sense, it places emphasis on the participants' viewpoints and experiences, and critical thoughts, as well. By having people with ID participate in this kind of research that analyzed their position, living conditions and education, the purpose was also to perceive them as subjects and not just research objects (Sieber & Tolich, 2013; WHO, 2011; see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2016).

Sample of Research

The research participants of this research comprised 14 young adults with ID (aged 17-23, 10 boys and 4 girls) and their parents (N= 14). They all had personal study plans in basic education, and except for one, they all had completed basic education according to their study plans. The youngsters and their parents were interviewed. The head researcher of the study knew these youngsters when she worked as their special education teacher in basic education and later as the researcher (Hermanoff, 2016). All participants lived in the North-Finland. All of them were able to speak, and one of them used also sign language and PC pictures to support communication (cf. also, Sipilä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2013).

Instrument and Procedures

The data were collected in the form of themed interviews in 2012 and 2014. All participants were interviewed personally. Plain language and pictures were used in the interviews to support communication. In plain language discussions, it is important to discuss one theme at a time and ask complementary questions if necessary. The interviewer's way of talking must be short, systematic, and appropriate to the interviewee's age level. The vocabulary used in the interview must be familiar mundane language, and gestures and expressions support communication (Tuffrey-Wijne & McEnhill, 2008). Based on the head researcher's experience, the plain language interview method would suit the participants the best. Watson (2012) has noted that innovative methods can increase research participants' participation in the line with emancipatory research ideology, and the unrestricted nature of the research.

The parents' descriptions of the various phases of study paths complemented the data. The purpose was to increase the reliability of the research because in the young adults with ID, the ability to remember and bring back events having taken place several years ago is limited. In addition, difficulties in speech and conversation skills made it more difficult to describe memories (Numminen, 2002).

Data Analysis

The research data were analyzed with a data-based content analysis (see Lincoln & Guba, 2000) that focused on the categorization of the contents of narratives (see Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2008). In addition, the analysis employed narrative analysis methods that refer to analytic and interpretative approach and text analysis (see Polkinghorne, 1995). The purpose was to compose meta-narratives from the participants' study experiences. These meta-narratives would describe different types of study paths among young people with ID. This kind of analysis provides information about how to recognize the critical nodes and good practices in their educational paths.

Ethicality and reliability have a special position in this research. The researcher's position and background as a special education teacher made it possible to recruit the research participants and get their and their parents' written permission to participate in the research. The parents' permission to participate in the research was necessary because some of the participants were still minors (under 18) when the first interviews were conducted in 2012. The uneven positions between a researcher and participants still had to be carefully discussed and analyzed. As the other has a diagnosed intellectual disability the interview setting is somewhat unsymmetrical. On the other, the whole research was based on the trust on the learning abilities of people with ID and the wish to improve their educational opportunities. The research thus aimed at speak up for people who may not be able to defend themselves in the current hard-valued world (Hermanoff, 2016).

Naturally, the participants' intellectual disability made the researchers to discuss ethical questions so that research permissions, agreements, and purpose of the research were carefully clarified (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). Therefore, the interviewing researcher made sure before conducting the interviews that the participants had understood what participation in the research meant and whether they still wanted to participate. Except for one parent, the interviews included only the research participant and researcher. After the interview, the researcher asked whether the interviewee had understood the questions correctly. In other words, the contents of the interview were reviewed together. The sensitivity of the research was also well acknowledged (cf., Sarivaara, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2013), and the supportive communication methods helped interviewees to participate in interviews and increased their trust in the research in general (Wilkenfeld, 2015).

The reliability of the research rests on the careful description of the data collection, analyses, and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The main purpose in the research has been to give voice to all research participants, and thus pursued to credibility, truthfulness, and justice (Lieblich, Tuval-Masiach, & Zilber, 1998). Much attention was paid on the participants' anonymity, and when reporting the findings, their identities are hidden. Instead, they are referred with numbers 1-14. The parents are referred with random numbers 1-14 as well. Student numbers and parent numbers are not identical (e.g., Interviewee 1 and Parent 1 are not necessarily from the same family).

Results of Research

The study paths of young people with ID could be grouped into three narratives based on the data. The narratives are fluent, complex, and interrupted study paths. The basic features of them are introduced next.

The Fluent Study Path

Six of the interviewees had clear and fluent study paths. All had performed 11 years of basic education, which had been based on their personal study plans. According to them, basic education had been "a great experience". Also their parents had been satisfied with teaching

arrangements, support, and professional personnel. Studies in small groups with the support of a special needs assistant was perceived positively.

“Our youngster went to basic education for 11 years in the same school, in a small group. He had a personal assistant. He loved school and was always enthusiastic about it.” (Parent 10)

Parents were thankful of students’ personalized teaching arrangements and of the fact that the teacher was supported by a special needs assistant and a multi professional team. In addition, if the youngster was diagnosed with ID early, their study paths were more fluent and the information about ID directed decisions regarding teaching and schooling from the beginning.

“When it comes to students with special needs, familiarization with students and using that information are especially important. Likewise, qualified special education teachers and up-dated information and skills are important.” (Parent 13)

Many of the youngsters had positive memories of their nearby school teachers and peers. They could remember well their teachers’ and friends’ first names.

“I liked to go to school. Everything at school was nice. I had work practicum at estate management, music, I got a scholarship.” (Interviewee 10)

The interviewees did not mention that they participated in special education or special education groups but they described school as a normal school. Familiarity and social environment appeared as important factors in the fluent school paths. Going to school together with peers increased the sense of togetherness.

“It was an ok school. The school was located near my home. I went there by bike with my friends. All my friends were there and I did all my grades there.” (Interviewee 8)

A fluent school path included that after compulsory basic education the young persons with ID had an extra study year in the same school or continued, in their home place, to secondary education aiming at an occupation. Thus, fluent study paths progressed without interruptions or difficulties, and in the transition phases, the students’ individual needs were well noticed and taken care of. Transitions inside their schools or from one school to another had been fluent. Preparatory education had increased their abilities to perform an individualized vocational education degree. During education, many interviewees could obtain or strengthen skills needed in vocational education, for example by participating in work practicum or work experiments. Simultaneously, they could think about their future plans.

“After basic education, the youngster started preparatory education here in our home place because there were not many options. He took the studies for two years. The vocational special education teacher and a counselor participated... These studies were good for our youngster. His self-esteem has become better.” (Parent 6)

Home-school collaboration during transition phases was one feature of fluent study paths. According to parents, discussions with teachers as well as organizational activities, parent conferences, and multi professional collaboration were the core collaboration forms. Open interaction, equality, and appreciation of parents’ expertise described collaboration. Fluent school paths were individualized and paid attention to chances and various needs in the young persons’ lives. At its best, education is flexible and provides various solutions. Although study paths have some obstacles, they did not make progress with studies more difficult or interrupted studies.

“Math is not easy. Well, because I lose my nerves. When you have to learn some damn clocks and counting money. That starts bugging me. Learning the clock is difficult and I lose my nerves. Otherwise, I do well at school, by heart, and I have a 100% reading and writing skills. They are beneficial to me here. And my assistants help me in turns.” (Interviewee 13)

In fluent study paths, guidance during the transition from basic education to secondary education and during the secondary education was crucial. Students and parents appreciated the advice and familiarization with the secondary education school. During the application period, it was important to have education experiments, education fairs, and free admission to schools to familiarize with them.

“In my old school, my teacher and I studied the form. I went there [the new school] with my friend, we stayed there for a week, and then we started the school at the same time. I did the decision myself. The school felt good, I did not have any other options.” (Interviewee 13)

Meaningful studies and thriving at school can be seen as a result of successful choices and transitions from basic education to secondary education:

“Now I am in a vocational school. I liked the carpenter profession and that is why I choose this school. I applied via internet, and my study counselor and I filled the application together. That was difficult, and I needed a lot of help. When I was in the 8th grade, I familiarized with the carpenters’ school during that work familiarization themed week at school.” (Interviewee 8)

The Complex Study Path

The complex study paths were usually not straightforward and became prolonged. Of the interviewed young persons with ID, six had complex study paths which meant that they had at least one change of school during their studies. A school was changed due to personal and school-related reasons.

“The teacher did not want to have a student with special needs in the classroom and therefore we had to change school. At first, I felt wrong, changing from a nearby school to faraway. The schooldays became extremely long. Later, it felt like a lottery win because our child got in a classroom with expert teachers and assistants.” (Parent 12)

Some personal factors were mentioned as reasons for complex study paths. These were for example health, study skills, and general well-being. Communication difficulties challenged studying and social interaction. Getting to know new people is not easy for anyone, and starting studies in new, unfamiliar school aroused feelings of insecurity among the young people with ID.

In addition, negative attitudes at school or among peers could lead to bullying. It was not easy to tell or talk about it:

“My own teacher cared for me and listened to me. At times, I was being bullied, called as retarded.” (Interviewee 11)

On the other hand, studies in another place and living in a boarding school were good ways of learning to live alone and move around independently.

“When the young person feels ready, changes are usually easier. Our youngster has clearly thrived in the other place. Life at the boarding school has strengthened many kinds of skills. Also traveling to the other place has taught independency and activated the youngster.” (Parent 7)

In addition, the young people could change their school after noticing that work practicum and contents did not correspond their original wishes. At some cases, administrative and structural changes at school interrupted their studies:

“He complemented a partial degree as his study time ended. He could not continue to the end but completed the degree for the suitable parts. When I gave some feedback about this, I was told that he/she could re-apply to education after being at work for a few years.” (Parent 7)

At their worst, complex study paths are fragmented and unsystematic. Low success or attachment to studies may result from the fact that the young people with ID did not draw a clear picture of the profession or that his or her future expectations were unrealistic. In addition, physical, social, and mental limitations and one’s life situation can make studies more complex.

“At least I needed some help with chores in the kitchen. Peeling potatoes and tying are a little bit difficult. I do not have an assistant, I would need one.” (Interviewee 12)

The young people had the experience that encountering and interpreting social or changing situations were troublesome. Difficulties in understanding and interpreting other people and in planning and foreseeing learning situations appeared as factors complicating study paths.

Clear and well-structured learning environments help these young people cope with the challenges of changing situations. They have to be able to plan and foresee their activities at daily, weekly, and monthly levels. It is possible to help them discern time, place, activities, and premises better at the school:

“I do have a sort to timetable. It is on the wall and has things that we have. It has pictures and written words.” (Interviewee 12)

“Yeah, I fill the schedule myself. I write there what I have to do. I know the clock.” (Interviewee 11)

Study paths become more fluent if students’ needs are noticed individually and the school develops successful solutions that support the students in their study environments.

The Interrupted Study Path

The interrupted study paths describe situations in which the youngsters’ studies have been interrupted, they have changed school or field at least two times, or they did not start education after basic education. Two of the interviewees had interrupted study paths. Lack of support or ignorance of students’ special needs predicted interrupted study paths.

“In the day care, our child’s special needs were well catered. He had speech therapy, action therapy, and after that a group assistant. The first grades in elementary school were waste of time. The youngster did not learn letters, numbers, to read, and to write. He did not have any homework, and we parents were not told at all how to help him/her at home. We hired a personal teacher at home and little by little his skills improved.” (Parent 3)

This student went to small group teaching in a middle school that had other students with ID. Then, the studies started to progress more fluently.

“He really went to school and studied. We did not feel at any point that the school would be just a place to store kids.” (Parent 3)

Time in basic education can become overwhelming which means that the transition to secondary education and finding a suitable form of education are not easy either. One obstacle

could be the difficulty of filling out the application forms. Lacking reading and writing skills and communication difficulties can shadow the young person's true skills and opinions. The language in application forms is too difficult to understand for many people with ID.

Indeed, studies could be interrupted against the student's own wish, and the institution's support was not sufficient to prevent the interruption.

"Our youngster started in gardening education but it did not last but the program was ended. Then the youngster went to cooking but it was too demanding and he had to quit his studies there. Then, there was nothing else for this kind of a youngster." (Parent 9)

In addition, reasons for quitting education could be interaction problems, physical, mental, and social limitations in studies, and the person's own difficult life situation. Unclear expectations could increase malaise and be manifested as repetitious and long-term absences from school. Support from the school institution was not timely or sufficient.

"Our youngster completed basic education in special education classroom and after that went to school for 1.5 years. After that, we decided that he/she would stay at home due to fatigue at school. He had to perform 34 study points later. In my opinion, the school did not provide sufficient individualized support; there were not enough adults. The young face lots of new things and situations that require social skills and interaction skills. The school expected independence but did not support independence. Our youngster has not continued his studies." (Parent 1)

The interrupted school path led the young person outside the school system. In addition to personal reasons, the structural factors can be the reason for interruption. These are for example insufficient support services, inflexible studies that cannot meet the student's special needs, and lack of educational options. Guidance and support could be fragmented. Still, the young persons with ID dreamed of continuing their studies, getting an occupation, and starting work—regardless of their education experiences.

"Work is important. If you do not get employed, you become unemployed. You do not have money and are soon queuing for bread. That is not a good thing." (Interviewee 9)

Discussion

Study success in young people with ID is a sum of many factors. Figure 1 illustrates four core factors directing their study processes: the student, school community, curriculum, and teacher. Although they do not fully explain a successful study path and learning, it became obvious that more attention to them should be paid when designing education for people with ID. In addition, support from home is extremely important to the fluency of study paths.

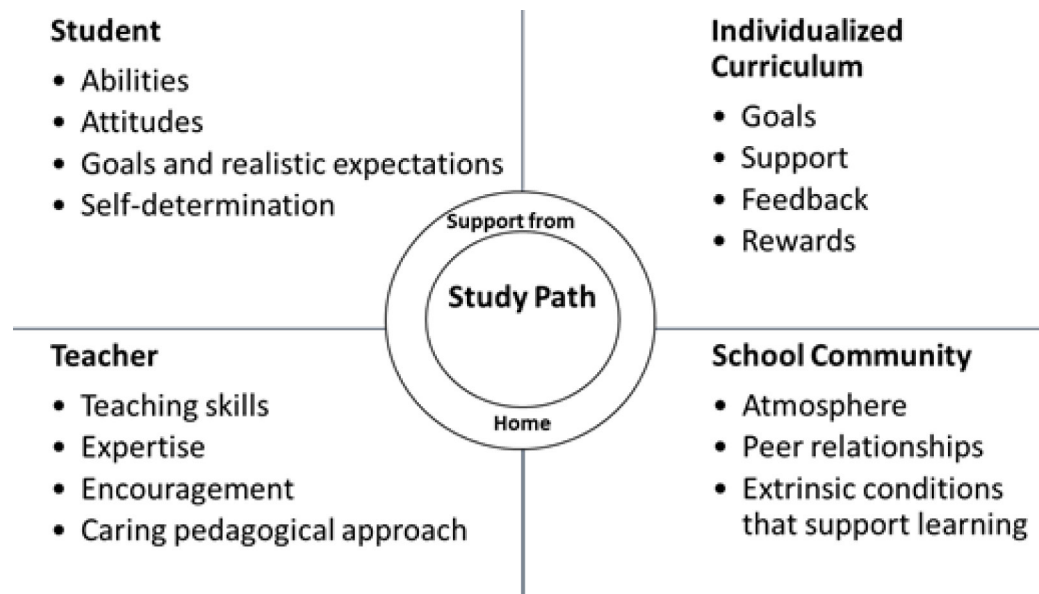


Figure 1: Study path of young people with ID and factors influencing it.

Perhaps, the most important factor in the study process of people with ID is the student himself or herself. Students' skills, attitudes, goals and realistic expectations as well as self-determination determine for their part the fluency of study path (Sheppard & Unsworth, 2010). Still, it does not mean that people with ID are all similar. Instead, they have their own personalities, hopes and wishes, and study skills. In addition, success in previous education, such as basic education, lay the foundation and determine the attitudes toward preparatory studies and actual vocational education. These experiences in students' study history can either strengthen or destroy their self-efficacy beliefs or self-confidence as learners. They have created a conception of themselves as learners. At secondary studies, their conception can be questioned depending also on how successful their school selection has been. In addition, students' expectations and understanding about the length and demands of studies can be unrealistic (Clarke, Camilleri, & Goding, 2015). Emphasis on reading and writing skills can become a problem, and other difficulties can cause insecurity as well. All depends on the student's self-regulation skills and ability to learn and lead independently. To some students with ID, these demands can decrease motivation while for others they appeared extremely motivating, as the results showed.

Indeed, motivation to perform well and complete courses also makes an important ingredient of a fluent study path. Students' motivation reflects in their way of performing studies and their persistence. In this research, the young people with ID appeared interested in studies and considered education important. Strong intrinsic motivation makes coping with study-related challenges easier also in students with ID. However, positive and encouraging feedback and support from the school are important because they increase the student's receptiveness to new learning experiences and tolerance of failures and provide information about their coping and progress in studies (Karan et al., 2010). Furthermore, it is important to remember that among students with ID studies are not the only thing filling their lives but they also have to learn about independent living and all kinds of everyday tasks, such as cleaning and doing laundry, that are equally important for their comprehensive positive development (Sheppard & Unsworth, 2010). Studies should also be in balance with other areas of life, interesting hobbies, good human relationships and family life, versatile and relaxing leisure time, that act as a good counterbalance to studying (Furco, 2010; Pazey, Schalock, Schaller, & Burkett, 2015)

Students' personal features are not, however, the only thing influencing their success: they are always a part of the school community that surrounds them and that either enhances or hinders

their chances of a fluent study path (Thompson, Wehmeyer, & Hughes, 2010). Collaboration and interaction with peers and sense of togetherness are important (Schuh, Sundar, & Hagner, 2014; Williams & Sheridan, 2006). Findings have showed the importance of school related factors that are, for example, a positive study atmosphere, the level of individualized support, multiprofessional collaboration and the role of a special needs assistant, the significance of the first study experiences and a sense of feeling welcome in the school with all special needs, and the level of interaction between the teaching personnel and students and their parents (Swedeen, Carter, & Molfenter, 2010). In this research, students with ID also preferred a school that was close to their home so that they could commute from homes although some interviewees were happy to learn independent life in boarding schools. Basically, the availability of sufficient support in the school community was one of the main factor in fluent study paths.

The individualized curriculum provides both teachers and students with clear goals that are tailored to pay attention to the special abilities and needs of students with ID and their expectations regarding the future work and employment (Alwell & Cobb, 2009). Furthermore, it is important that the curriculum is very concrete and easily understandable in nature. It has to be closely connected with daily tasks and routines (Dunst et al., 2006). Goals mentioned in the curriculum have to describe clearly what the student is expected to learn and how they can perform and complete studies. In addition, the way of evaluating the personal progress (e.g., how to evaluate students' learning and skills; what the realistic time of completing a degree is, etc.) of each student with ID has to be clearly written in the curriculum. Curriculum planning can also pay attention to the study progresses and their phases, and therefore, turn curricula into more student-centered and collaborative with homes (Heslop & Abbott, 2007). Parents are usually the best experts of the lives, skills, and needs in students with ID (e.g., Carter et al., 2013; Carter, Brock, & Trainor, 2014).

Teaching skills, teachers' ability to be in an appreciating interaction with students and to guide students make the bedrock of a fluent study path in people with ID (see also Äärelä, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2016). Teaching skills can be practiced and developed, and among students with ID, teachers need certain kinds of sensitivity and abilities. Caring teacherhood focuses on the positive sides of people with ID as learners (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2016). Caring teachers are enthusiastic about their field and want to share their passion with students; understand the wider connections of their teaching and are able to adjust their teaching to meet the students' special needs; encourage learning that promotes understanding and self-determination, independence, activity, and problem-solving skills; set clear and personal goals for students; use appropriate and flexible evaluation methods; provide constructive and positive feedback for students; and respect students as themselves and are interested in their personal and professional development (see also Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011).

Studying and learning have plenty of similar features. Learning new is always a process that can include failures and obstacles, but also joy of learning and development—regardless of the learner's skills or special needs (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). Study paths of young people with ID should typify good learning that is constructive and based on appropriate methods, goals, and expectations. Naturally, memory, attention, motivation, self-efficacy beliefs, and learning styles and orientations have their own role in good learning. Indeed, to achieve good learning results, students have different ways of acting, learning, perceiving, and processing information. Students can also have learning difficulties that manifest themselves as spelling errors, nervousness, time-management problems, motivational problems, and lack of attention and initiative. Teaching and education of people with ID should be physically, mentally, and socially accessible allowing them to use their personal learning styles and strategies.

Conclusions

As the research showed, education and learning make an important area of life also among people with ID. Like in every individual, people with ID have their personal needs for support that vary in different environments. Caring schools and teachers pay attention to students' needs and encounter them as individuals so that their fluent study paths and study success could be enhanced. In Finland, majority of students with ID receive strong multiprofessional support already during basic education.

Still, transition from basic education to secondary education is a significant phase in the life of a young person with ID. Guidance and support are important already because it is challenging to find out information about educational and occupational choices. If students have participated in special education teaching during basic education, they are likely to receive information about various preparatory education for vocational education and independent life and they can thus learn about the nature of vocational education and possible occupations they can obtain through education. Although multiprofessional collaboration has become more and more professionalized, it would be crucial to remember to hear students' own viewpoints and experiences when planning education and making choices. The challenge is not so much to get in education but to find education that meets the student's personal needs and hopes, and what happens after completing the education program. Students could influence more on curriculum planning.

The purpose of education is to prepare, train, rehabilitate, and guide students with ID into good life that includes work, health, and relationships. But based on this research, it still is reasonable to ask whether the current vocational education is based on the needs and abilities of people with ID themselves. Does education pay enough attention to the promotion of quality of life and functional abilities through acknowledging students' strengths and finding their place in the surrounding community? Also new technological opportunities could be even better employed in education.

Secondary education should educate future experts to work markets and promote learning and societal participation in the young who need special support. Based on this research, educational options for people with ID are limited and, on the other hand, their education has merely a function to storage the graduates: young people with ID are mainly educated outside the actual work market, to retire, to work in day centers, or to work in supported employment. Employment and day center activities should be appreciated as an important part of the lives of people with ID. Their contents and methods should be updated so that work would promote the sense of independence and make it possible to experience the joy and satisfaction from working and creating relationships at work.

Fundamentally, the quality of life among people with ID consists of the same ingredients than any other people's quality of life. Personal and environmental factors influence it as well. Development is possible when people can participate in activities that expand their knowledge and experiences. The young people with ID are experts of their lives and they have to be heard. Research wise it is important to have people with ID participated in research and hear their voices, and to understand the meaning of this kind of research when drawing educational political guidelines.

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