

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Developing soft (employability) skills and work experience opportunities to prepare students with intellectual disability for open employment

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Abstract

This research identifies the soft (employability) skills that key stakeholders view as essential for young people with intellectual disability (ID) to gain and maintain open employment. The study subsequently examined the work experience opportunities for young people with ID to develop these soft skills during their school years. Qualitative data from 89 participants (questionnaires and interviews) and a review of the current literature informed the development of a set of soft skills for open employment and a proposed model for work exposure programmes from the commencement to the conclusion of high school.

KEY WORDS

employability skills, intellectual disability, work experience, work preparation

Key points

- Sixteen soft (employability) skills are identified under three broad categories: (a) personal attributes; (b) working collegially and collaboratively; and (c) task focus and completion.
- Key stakeholder groups (parents, disability employment service providers and employers) rated punctuality/reliability, oral communication and personal grooming/hygiene as priority skills.
- Challenges to securing work experience for school-aged students with intellectual disability are identified. Teacher participants share strategies for overcoming some of these limitations.
- It is suggested that work exploration should commence earlier for young people with intellectual disability. In addition to developing students' soft skills, it is also necessary to develop language and expectations around employability.

INTRODUCTION

Work experience, also known as work exposure or work-based learning experience, is built into the school curriculum to provide all students with opportunities to explore career options that will guide their post-school trajectory. However, there are barriers to securing work experience for young people with intellectual disability (ID), not least of all because they

may lack, or are perceived to lack, entry-level skills. These entry-level skills are less about vocational or technical skills than they are about soft skills, that is, the inter- and intra-personal attributes required to participate efficiently and effectively in a workplace, sometimes referred to as employability, generic, transferable or twenty-first-century skills. We argue that students with ID need soft skills to secure work experience, and they need work experience to secure

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open employment, where they can further develop soft skills and subsequently achieve social inclusion. The development of soft skills and work experience are both critical to securing employment. These aspects are intertwined but often missing in the curriculum and education plans of students with ID.

This study investigates soft (employability) skills for young people with ID and the work experience opportunities available during their school years in an Australian context. By *open employment*, we mean competitive employment options in the general workforce rather than disability-specific options, such as sheltered employment and social enterprises (Meltzer et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). We recognize the complexity of effective transition from school to work (Rooney & Young, 2023; Trainor et al., 2020) and acknowledge that extensive and varied interventions to support the transition process are critical (Schutz & Carter, 2022); however, this study is limited to two specific aspects of transition to work: soft skills development and work experience.

The article draws on largely qualitative data elicited from 89 stakeholders, including young people with ID and their families; Disability Employment Service (DES) providers; employers of young people with ID; and special education teachers. All stakeholders, including employers, have had experiences with young people with ID. Following a review of the literature, the findings are presented in two parts. First, we report stakeholders' views on the soft (employability) skills they deem to be priority skills. Second, we explore work experience opportunities available for students with ID. Then, in the discussion section, we suggest a set of soft (employability) skills to be developed during the school years and tentatively propose a model for a school-level work experience programme that special education classes may find beneficial.

Background literature

Employment rates for people with disability are low in Australia and elsewhere. Unemployment rates for people with disability remain significantly higher than for those living without disability. International statistics consistently highlight disparities in (un)employment rates for people with disability, including the UK (Francis-Devine et al., 2021), Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020), the USA (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), Canada (Morris et al., 2018), Latin America (Duryea et al., 2019) and Nordic countries (Gjertsen et al., 2021).

While open employment statistics for people living with disability are poor, the situation worsens for people with ID. International research highlights particularly poor employment rates for people with ID. It is difficult to ascertain the precise level of open employment,

as countries use different methods to collect data, but Canadian statistics reveal that people with developmental disabilities have the lowest employment rates of any disability group (Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2020). Further, only 20% of American youth (aged 16 to 21 years) with a cognitive disability have a job (Migliore et al., 2018). The Norwegian employment rate is reportedly 24.5%; however, 90% of these people work under adapted measures, with only 10% in open employment (Gjertsen et al., 2021). These (un)employment outcomes are appalling from a human rights perspective and represent a significant underutilisation of skills that people with disability, including those with ID, could contribute to the workforce and society at large.

The impact of (un)employment for young people with intellectual disability

Limited employment opportunities deprive young people with ID of benefits that others take for granted. The benefits of meaningful work are far-reaching in terms of the health and well-being of individuals with ID (Gjertsen et al., 2021). Open employment enables social connections to be made (Kocman et al., 2018), and the ability to earn money promotes independence and is a symbol of adulthood (Kittelsaa & Kermit, 2015; Kocman et al., 2018). Securing meaningful employment also enables a person to achieve their personal aspirations, which is just as important for young people with ID as it is for any other young people (Meltzer et al., 2018; Trainor et al., 2020).

Recruiting people with disability in open employment also benefits employers. A systematic review of studies from 1997 to 2017 revealed that hiring people with disability can improve profitability through staff loyalty, which reduces staff turnover, particularly in hospitality, grocery and food services, and retail (Lindsay et al., 2018). Lindsay et al. (2018) also found that businesses can achieve a competitive advantage from customers who value inclusion and diversity.

Despite the significant evidence for positive outcomes of the employment of people with disability, including ID, societal perceptions continue to be one of the most pervasive barriers to people with ID obtaining open employment (Shier et al., 2009; Winn & Hay, 2009). Teachers have identified that a significant barrier to employment for students is their lack of social skills and employment skills, as captured under the soft skills umbrella (Carter et al., 2021). Similarly, Clark et al. (2019) identified barriers that impede employment, including limited support during career preparation and work experience. They concluded that soft skill instruction could be a way to assist young people with ID to obtain employment.

Soft (employability) skills

Technical skills are rarely enough to secure and maintain employment. This is true for all workers, including young adults with ID seeking to transition from school to the employment market (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2018). The current demand for soft skills in the contemporary labour market is undeniable, and the ‘need for soft skills and their impact on education has become a significant focus for governments and industries around the world’ (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2018, para. 1).

Research is replete with lists of the soft skills preferred by employers. However, Matteson et al. (2016, p. 80) caution that an ‘absence of clear definitions or taxonomies of discrete soft skills makes it challenging for the idea of soft skills to truly gain traction in research or in practice’. They suggest we should not ‘simply live with the ambiguity because the concept is too important to individual and organisational performance to let it remain a trite and vague expression of workplace skills that are so critical to success’ (Matteson et al., 2016, p. 80).

Studies have revealed this gray area surrounding soft skills. For example, the content analysis of community college programmes undertaken by Ellis et al. (2014) identified 23 soft skills, and reported that the soft skills most demanded by employers were honesty, integrity, listening, and the ability to serve clients and customers. Fraser et al. (2019) suggested 10 employability skills: positive attitude, communication, teamwork, self-management, willingness to learn, thinking skills (problem-solving and decision-making), resilience, innovation, entrepreneurship and cultural competence. The diversity of desirable skills is further evidenced in the analysis by Yoder et al. (2020) of nine employer surveys. They identified that the number of social and emotional skills investigated in each survey ranged from four to 21 different skills.

Despite the polyvalent notion of soft skills, Ju et al. (2012) revealed that 168 employers from various industries identified four soft skills as important: demonstrating personal integrity/honesty; ability to follow instructions; ability to show respect for others; and ability to be on time and punctual. Further, they found that the soft skills valued by these employers were the same, regardless of whether the employee had a disability or not.

Although there is no consensus on a single set of priority soft skills, the value of soft skills for increased employment prospects cannot be ignored. The question then arises of how soft skills might be acquired, mastered and generalized by young people with ID.

Soft skills in special education

To prepare young people with ID for life beyond school, many students undertake a life skills curriculum. Life

skills were defined by Cronin as ‘those skills or tasks that contribute to the successful, independent functioning of an individual in adulthood’ (Cronin, cited in Alwell & Cobb, 2009, p. 83). These skills are generally grouped into five broad clusters: self-care and domestic living; recreation and leisure; communication and social skills; vocational skills; and other skills vital for community participation. Although the life skills curriculum does incorporate vocational education, emerging research advocates a move toward soft skill development to improve the employability of young people, including those with ID. For example, a working group comprised of disability community stakeholders, including persons with disabilities, made 10 recommendations, and their first was ‘Stronger emphasis on the development of soft skills, and training in authentic work settings, as part of strengthening vocational education curriculum in SPED [special education] schools’ (Third Enabling Masterplan Workgroup, 2016, p. 5). The outcome they propose is a revised vocational education curriculum in special education schools to further emphasize the intentional development of soft skills for work.

If special educators are intent on preparing their students for open employment, as they should be, they cannot ignore that employers are becoming more explicit about what they want and need with regard to soft skills, and that a lack of soft skills is a barrier to open employment. The question thus emerging is: how do students with ID best learn soft skills relevant to themselves and areas of potential open employment?

With respect to the hospitality industry, Losekoot et al. (2018) suggested that soft skills are most effectively learned by interacting with customers and colleagues. They further explained that the soft skills developed through these experiences, which included developing initiative, punctuality, self-confidence and improved social skills, remain valuable even if a student decides not to continue in the hospitality industry (Losekoot et al., 2018).

This leads to the question of what opportunities young people with ID have to apply their developing soft skills in authentic contexts during their school years.

Work experience in the school years

The importance of access to work experience during the school years is widely recognized (Beyer et al., 2016; Tholén et al., 2017). It has been identified as a ‘research-based predictor of postschool education and employment’ (Mazzotti et al., 2021, p. 58). An Australian report, *Looking to the future: report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training*, recommends that all students have exposure to work exploration activities and, more specifically, that high school students with disability should have both school-based and work-based learning experiences (Australian Government, 2020).

Work experience is necessary to develop navigational capacity and expand notions of self-determination, which is particularly important for young people with disability and their families, who may struggle to develop and then realize their aspirations (Maia-Pike, 2021). Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al. (2020) reported the late introduction to the concept of work and workplace culture education as the second-highest barrier to people with disabilities participating or sustaining participation in open employment. The final phase of their Delphi study identified policy solutions to improve employment, including ‘promoting better education (building employability and job skills into education) in high school to enable smooth transition to post-secondary or employment’ (Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2020, p. 2700). Strnadová et al. (2016) suggested that workplace planning should start in Year 9 (around 14–15 years of age), or even earlier, rather than in the final 12 months of formal schooling, which is common in specialized school settings.

In addition to commencing work exposure earlier during the school years, there are also calls to reconsider the place of traditional vocational education training (VET) in classroom settings to achieve work skill curriculum goals for students with ID. Research suggests that while VET may be effective for some populations of students, for students with ID, the generic skills developed in these classroom settings do not readily transfer to workplaces. Instead, these students would benefit from practical, hands-on experience with appropriate adjustments and support (Kregel et al., 2020). As reported by Kregel et al., in Australia, VET data (for 2014–2017) revealed extremely low course completion rates (5.7–9.1%), with employment outcome rates for cohorts with ID ranging from 20.5% to 55.8%.

Work experience occurring in authentic work environments has consistently been associated with better employment outcomes post-school for young people with ID (Kregel et al., 2020; Rooney-Kron & Dymond, 2021). Further, from an economic perspective, data indicate that interventions that directly engage individuals in community-integrated settings result in cost-beneficial outcomes (Taylor et al., 2021).

To prepare students with ID for open employment, the evidence from the extensive and diverse literature in this field suggests two areas for special education teachers to consider: (1) explicit inclusion of soft (employment) skill mastery; and (2) moving beyond classroom-based work skills activities and toward more community-based workplace experiences. These two areas are addressed in this research.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Australian study reported here sought to understand how special education during the high school years could improve practice to increase the potential of people with

ID securing open employment post-school. To do this, a number of research questions were investigated, two of which are addressed herein:

1. What soft skills do key stakeholders prioritize for young people with ID to gain and maintain open employment?
2. What opportunities are available to young people with ID to develop soft skills during their school years?

Before describing the research design and analysis procedures, it is necessary to clarify the researchers' positionality so that possible influences on the project, based on researcher identities, are understood. The researchers do not identify as having a disability and are not carers or parents of a young person with a disability. The research is driven by the researchers' collective experience and knowledge in the education discipline and specifically special education and workplace learning.

This is a qualitative study. This approach was deemed most appropriate to address the research questions because it would allow the experiences and practices of key stakeholders (young people with ID and their families, DES providers, employers of young people with ID, and special education teachers) to emerge (Crotty, 2020).

In total, 89 stakeholders from across Australia contributed data in two ways: questionnaire and semi-structured interview. This number was fewer than originally intended, as the onset of the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns in Australia significantly impacted participation. Despite this barrier, rich qualitative data were obtained from these 89 stakeholders and were sufficient to address the research questions under investigation.

Questionnaire

To address the first research question, an online questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was directed toward young people with ID and their families, DES providers and employers who had experience employing a young person with ID. Although the questions asked of all stakeholder groups were aligned, each group was funneled through the Qualtrics software to allow particularized questions of stakeholder groups. The first set of questions were screening questions to ensure the respondents had experience with a young person (aged 15 to 25 years) who has an intellectual disability. Background questions were included that asked parents about their child, DES providers about their services and employers about their organization.

The majority of questionnaire items were qualitative, open-ended questions that enabled respondents to write short responses. Likert-scale questions were also used for their value in assigning numeric value to qualitative concepts (such as attitudes and preferences). A three-point

Likert scale ('not important', 'desirable', 'essential') was used to investigate the value placed on specific experiences, while other questions asked respondents to identify whether an issue had 'no impact', 'moderate impact' or 'high impact'. All Likert-scale questions were compulsory but did include option for a 'do not know/NA' response. To follow up two Likert-scale questions, respondents were asked to rank (that is, select in order) the four most important items from the list of items that were included in the Likert-scale question.

Several qualitative questions incorporated plain English to enable young people with ID to voice their opinions and experiences. Parents/caregivers were asked to complete questions alongside their child which made it impossible to state with confidence that the responses reflect the child's personal perspective. Given this, data from both the child and parent/caregiver are presented together as family responses.

A link to the online questionnaire was distributed via email using multiple personal and professional networks and social media. There were 77 completed questionnaires included in the final analysis. The stakeholder groups and location of respondents are presented in Table 1.

Semi-structured interviews

To address the second research question and explore questionnaire items in greater depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with special education teachers and DES providers. Information was sought on participants' backgrounds in relation to work preparation and young people with ID. The skills that participants identified as essential for students in order to gain and maintain employment were discussed. Ways in which young people were supported to develop the skills needed to be employable were explored. Participants were offered space to identify the barriers they had experienced in working with young people, their families and organizations in preparation for post-school employment. Participants were also encouraged to discuss

TABLE 1 Questionnaire respondents.

| Stakeholder group | % | State | % |
|--|----|------------------------------------|----|
| Families/caregivers (including young people) | 31 | Australian Capital Territory (ACT) | 16 |
| Disability Employment Service providers | 39 | New South Wales (NSW) | 44 |
| Employers | 30 | Northern Territory (NT) | 3 |
| | | Queensland (QLD) | 7 |
| | | South Australia (SA) | 5 |
| | | Victoria (VIC) | 25 |

successful work preparation experiences that occurred during the school years.

Participants were recruited using a flyer describing the purpose of the research, which was shared via professional networks, such as the researchers' social media accounts. While initially planning to hold the interviews face-to-face at a place convenient to each participant, interviews were subsequently conducted online because of Covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions and lockdowns.

Semi-structured interviews took place over Zoom™ and were 45 to 60 minutes in duration. Participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions and provide examples of their experience of preparing young people for employment. In addition, the interviews enabled further exploration of themes arising from questionnaire data. Interviews also invited discussions about necessary skills and fruitful opportunities that would benefit students seeking open employment.

In total, 12 participants attended an interview. All participants were given a pseudonym. The interview participants are described in Table 2.

The project adhered to human research ethics principles and received formal ethics clearance from the University of Technology Sydney (ETH19-4386).

Data analysis

Qualitative research naturally includes smaller numbers of participants, but the data that emerge tend to be detailed and rich (Cohen et al., 2011). With regard to the quantitative data from the questionnaire, the number

TABLE 2 Interview participants.

| Pseudonym | Description of current position | Location |
|-----------|--|----------|
| Alana | Support teacher, transition | NSW |
| Eleanor | Associate principal (curriculum, VET and workplace learning) | WA |
| Elizabeth | Employment consultant, DES provider | NSW |
| Elsie | Specialist high school teacher | ACT |
| Emily | Specialist high school teacher | WA |
| Evelyn | Support teacher, transition | NSW |
| Ian | Engagement consultant, DES provider | NSW |
| Isabel | Assistant principal, specialist high school | WA |
| Leanne | Teacher, transitions and pathways | NT |
| Leisel | Inclusion officer | ACT |
| Natasha | School adviser, transition | NSW |
| Nathan | Employment consultant, DES provider | NSW |

Abbreviations: DES, Disability Employment Service; VET, vocational education training.

of participants limited reporting to descriptive analysis, relying on frequencies and percentages to report data (Loeb et al., 2017).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the qualitative data from the questionnaires were extracted for analysis. In the first instance, each researcher independently engaged in open coding of the interview transcripts and qualitative questionnaire responses. During this first cycle of analysis, codes, in the form of descriptive labels, were attached to data 'chunks' (Miles et al., 2019). In a subsequent cycle of analysis, substantive pattern codes were identified to group emerging themes into smaller, more meaningful units (Miles et al., 2019; Sarantakos, 2005). The second phase of data analysis involved the two researchers coming together to test their emerging concepts and codes and negotiate final themes for reporting. This process builds trustworthiness using researcher triangulation (Richards & Hemphill, 2017; Shenton, 2004). Each theme was then presented using narrative descriptions with direct quotations from interviews and questionnaires as illustrative examples of each concept.

TABLE 3 Fourteen employability skills included in the questionnaire.

| 14 employability skills |
|---|
| Oral communication (speaking and listening) |
| Written communication (e.g. reading, filling in forms and taking notes) |
| Numeracy/math skills |
| Teamwork/collaboration |
| Problem-solving/independently finding solutions |
| Showing initiative |
| Ability to plan/be organized |
| Ability to manage oneself/not need constant supervision |
| Willingness to learn new things |
| Confidence using technology |
| Punctuality and reliability |
| Personal grooming/hygiene |
| Social skills (e.g. conversation skills, personal space and self-awareness) |
| Following instructions |

TABLE 4 Priority skills identified by each stakeholder group.

| Families | DES providers | Employers |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Teamwork/collaboration | Punctuality/reliability (=1st) | Personal grooming/hygiene (=1st) |
| Following instructions | Personal grooming/hygiene (=1st) | Oral communication (=1st) |
| Oral communication | Following instructions | Teamwork/collaboration |
| Punctuality/reliability (=4th) | Oral communication | Willingness to learn new things |
| Personal grooming/hygiene (=4th) | Problem-solving/finding solutions | Punctuality/reliability |

FINDINGS

Soft (employability) skills

In addressing the first research question, questionnaire respondents were asked to rate the importance of 14 employability skills (see Table 3) for young people with ID. The researchers were working collaboratively with a disability service provider located in Melbourne, Victoria (Australia) and the eight employability skills taught as part of their Steps to Employment programme (Onemda, n.d.) contributed to the employability skills selected for inclusion in the questionnaire. In addition to the eight skills taught in the Steps to Employment programme, five additional skills were identified in the literature (Beyer et al., 2016; Dunn et al., 2018; Kaehne, 2016; Molfenter et al., 2017).

The highest-rated skills (ranked as essential) across the combined stakeholder groups were: following instructions (=1st); personal grooming/hygiene (=1st); punctuality and reliability (3rd); and oral communication (speaking and listening) (4th).

The two skills with the lowest rankings (rated non-essential) were numeracy/math skills and confidence using technology. Interestingly, these are two areas that are more likely to be categorized as academic skills rather than soft skills.

In a subsequent question, respondents were asked to identify the four most important employability skills from the same list of 14 items (Table 3). As depicted in Table 4, families selected teamwork/collaboration, following instructions, oral communication and (=4th) punctuality/reliability and personal grooming/hygiene as priorities. DES providers selected punctuality/reliability and personal grooming/hygiene (=1st), following instructions, oral communication and problem-solving/finding solutions. Employers selected personal grooming/hygiene and oral communication (=1st), followed by teamwork/collaboration, willingness to learn new things and punctuality/reliability.

All three stakeholder groups again identified following instructions, punctuality/reliability and personal grooming/hygiene as priorities. Employers and families both identified the need to engage in teamwork and work collaboratively as important, while DES providers were alone in identifying problem-solving as a priority skill.

While exploring employability skills during interviews, social skills were consistently identified as being more important than academic skills. Concerns were raised about external school-level courses that primarily focused on teaching vocational skills. Similarly, special education transition teachers questioned special education classroom teachers' obligation to cover all key learning areas in the school curriculum (for example, science, history, geography) when they considered the primary focus should be on developing skills for socially acceptable behavior and self-care skills, such as using bathrooms correctly.

Following instructions emerged as a priority from questionnaire data, and special education teachers (that is, interview participants) confirmed this as particularly important in preparing students to work with less-preferred supervisors and colleagues in workplace settings. Several interview participants also highlighted the need for their students to learn how to accept corrections from supervisors and co-workers. Participants identified 'asking for help' as an essential skill to be developed. Teachers recognized the challenges for their students in dealing 'with life outside this wonderful little cocoon we've created [school]' to 'cope with change of routine' (Emily, WA).

The need for young people with ID to understand their own strengths, weaknesses and preferences was considered paramount in identifying suitable employment and building confidence to see themselves in employment. As Natasha (NSW) explains to her students, 'With work experience, it's not [just] about what you want to do. It's also about finding out what you don't want to do'.

Drawn from existing literature and the work preparation skills taught in our research partner's Steps to Employment programme, the 14 skills identified in Table 3 were investigated. Subsequent analysis of the questionnaire and interview data resulted in a revised set of soft (employability) skills as outlined in Table 5.

To address the second research question, we then explored the ways in which students with ID were preparing for employment during their school years.

Work experience during school years

Key stakeholder groups identified work experience during the school years as one of the most important factors in preparing students for future work. Participating in work experience outside school presents a vital opportunity to practise and refine the soft skills that are being explicitly taught at school. However, significant challenges exist that prevent schools from securing work experience for students with ID.

Barriers to securing work experience in the community

Interview participants claimed that difficulties in working with potential employers resulted from not having the right mechanisms in place to support work experience; employers not understanding what ID actually means; and employers not taking a strengths-based approach (that is, focusing on what young people can do).

Schools in highly populated locations seek placements for large numbers of students and face additional challenges:

You've got huge numbers of kids in support units in schools ... finding work experience for 30 kids [with disability], and that's just one school ... I've gone out on a limb and begged [organization] and had to get down on my hands and knees to get five days of work experience for this kid, and he was so thrilled about it, and when we arrived, no one knew we were coming. No one cared.

(Elaine, NSW)

Students with disability are often competing with their non-disabled peers for the finite work experience placements that exist in a community. This subsequently limits the types of organizations they can access, which limits their opportunities to organizations that 'do a lot of volunteering or already have a clientele base that have disability' (Eleanor, WA).

Some interview participants lamented the lack of opportunities provided by local councils and large schools,

TABLE 5 Soft skills for open employment.

| |
|--|
| Personal attributes |
| Honesty and integrity |
| Organizational strategies and skills |
| Personal grooming and hygiene |
| Punctuality and reliability |
| Understand own strengths, challenges and preferences |
| View oneself as employable |
| Willingness to learn new things |
| Work collegially and collaboratively |
| Accept correction from supervisors and co-workers |
| Communication skills (including listening to others) |
| Follow instructions from a variety of people |
| Interact with a variety of people, including less-preferred people |
| Task focus and completion |
| Accept and complete less-preferred tasks |
| Accept change of routine (with necessary support) |
| Ask for assistance when necessary |
| Manage oneself/not need constant supervision to work |
| Problem-solving/independently finding solutions |

where there is obvious alignment between young people with ID interests and capabilities and the types of employment opportunities these organizations can offer. This was highlighted by both Alana and Leisel:

I've been on the Disability Inclusion Action Plan of the councils ... You have so many areas that could provide work experience, and these are huge councils ... and all I've got in the five years I've been in this role, I've managed to get five days of work experience at a council for one student ... They write it into their Disability Action Plan, but there does not seem to be any accountability, or they'll give the job to the cute 17-year-old with Down's syndrome who can stand at the door and greet people 'cause that looks good.

(Alana, NSW)

Schools can do better as well, in terms of employment. You think of some of these massive schools that I've even been visiting and the potential and possibility of employing previous past students with disability, whether it's doing some admin roles or working in the canteen, and there just seems to be no pathway links, but the places are there. It's just that people's understanding, and the time has not been invested into exploring that.

(Leisel, ACT)

Parents responding to the questionnaire also lamented the challenges in finding employers willing to take on their children:

We just need to find the right organization that wants to nurture her to share those experiences and help build on [my child's] goals in her life and work. It sounds so simple, and we are often left wondering why it is so hard! It is ignorance, time and fear that prevents business leaders from supporting a person with ID in work. The fear of the unknown, but there is so much help, resources and great supports that could aid business leaders to create/develop roles that a person with ID could be successful in. They need time to be trained and resources to support employment for people living with ID and in the current world we live in.

Further, there are significant financial constraints, as most students will require a support person to accompany them in the workplace for an extended period. Participants suggested that the traditional work experience model of mainstream students (usually

a two-week block) needs to be modified and clearly communicated to potential employers. It was suggested that students with ID could benefit from shorter experiences (say, two hours per day over several weeks) before building toward more extended time in a workplace.

Features of successful work experience opportunities

Although the challenges of securing work experience dominated the data, some participants alluded to features of successful work experience placements. First, data revealed that securing work experience relies heavily on individual teachers building relationships within the community, and it is primarily organizations that have an understanding of disability that provide successful work experience placements. As Elaine (NSW) stated, 'We get connections with organisations that will be happy to have our young people coming in and out, and usually they've got an interest in disabilities'. Other teachers had a similar experience:

I think the biggest factor that makes it really successful is in the places we choose, there's often a lived experience ... They either have had children, grandchildren, or some experience close to home of someone with a disability. So they are more inclined to want to accept our kids into that work placement and their expectations, and they do not mind things being a bit differentiated, and they have more time to work with the student. You've got to have people there that understand disability.

(Eleanor, WA)

Other interviewees highlighted the need to build relationships between the student and employer prior to the placement and engage in specific training for the work experience employers. For example, Natasha (NSW) reported:

I will start out making sure that we actually take the young person to meet the employer prior to them ever starting and explain to the people ... working with that young person, how to give instructions. It's not just about the young person learning to take instructions; it's also about learning how to give instructions ... A lot of times, if they are successful, the employers will go, 'Hey, we will have them again,' which is great.

Similarly, Eleanor (WA) advised:

I spend a lot of time going to sites. I disclose the disability to the employers, then talk to

them about how that may manifest. We talk about the triggers. So all the way throughout, we disclose everything to employers. We make sure they understand. Some of our kids actually have risks, so we actually make sure that they understand those, so if there's risk management plans, behavior management plans. I believe the more open and transparent you are with them [employers], they have a better understanding. It's not to scare people off; it's so [they] have an understanding of the needs of that [student].

Ways in which organizational change could be enacted were suggested by other questionnaire respondents and included 'creating a specific role covering repetitive tasks rather than expecting the person with ID to fit into a role that already exists'. Another suggested:

More awareness and consideration for some of the smaller jobs that their business have that are overlooked, these could, in fact, be undertaken by someone with a disability who is highly capable of completing these jobs and would gain so much satisfaction out of doing so.

Additional solutions to address the lack of work experience opportunities became evident during interviews where teachers described innovative programs, often in the form of micro-businesses.

School-based work exploration initiatives

Some resourceful educators revealed during interviews that they have established school-based work exploration activities that extend into the local community, thus capitalizing on the knowledge and skills developed and

mastered in schools and allowing them to be generalized beyond the school community. These initiatives differ from traditional school-based life skill activities (for example, learning to cook in a school kitchen) as they replicate authentic business practices, are sustained over time and involve community engagement. Table 6 presents a brief overview of school-based work exploration programmes encountered as part of this research.

There is potential for these initiatives to both develop soft skills and also raise students' (and families') awareness of their employability. Further research is required to evaluate whether such initiatives are translating into post-school employment.

While acknowledging the potential of these enterprises to support work preparation, it is important to note the considerable costs (financial and time) involved in sustaining these enterprises, and the challenge associated with making sufficient money to continue operating while also working within various departmental guidelines and policies. Also, concerning, these enterprises remove the onus from the community and employers to provide meaningful work experience placements and post-school employment options for young people with ID. Instead, the burden is placed on teachers and families. This works against the principles of inclusion.

DISCUSSION

Data revealed agreement in stakeholders' perspectives of priority employability skills, particularly in relation to following instructions, punctuality/reliability and personal grooming/hygiene. These findings strengthen the findings of Ju et al. (2012) wherein stakeholders (employers) indicated that the ability to follow instructions and be punctual were priority skills. It also revealed that

TABLE 6 School-based work exposure programmes.

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Skillset program (NT) | The school operates a café located in the local shopping Centre and runs the opportunity 'op' shop located next door to the café. The café also provides an outlet to sell the merchandise made by the students. |
| Succulents to Market (ACT) | Students make concrete pots and grow succulents. The products are sold at the local markets and can make between \$400 and \$800. The teacher is focused on setting up a micro-business for students post-school. |
| UberKatie (WA) | A student named Katie loved cooking, so her school set up UberKatie. She prepares a menu, and each Friday takes orders from staff (with assistance from teachers for money management). She wears a badge and a uniform. It led to Katie volunteering at a neighboring mainstream school canteen one day per week. |
| Veggie Patch (NSW) | To reduce the cost of the school cooking programme, a vegetable and herb garden was developed. The surplus produce is sold at the local market on weekends. A worm farm was subsequently established, and the worm castings are sold at substantial profit to members of the community. |
| Little Bird Enterprises (WA) | Little Bird Enterprises is geared toward sustainability, recycling, reusing and repurposing. One example from their programme is making bird seed feeders. Several steps are involved in the process using wild bird seed mix, adding gelatine and sugar, and turning the feed into molds. The bird feeders are sold, making enough money to reinvest in the enterprise and reward the students. |

the lowest value was placed on academic skills, such as numeracy/math. The interrelatedness of math and punctuality, from an educational perspective, is obvious. To be punctual and reliable, the underlying mathematical concepts of time and interpreting schedules, such as public transport timetables, must be mastered. However, the fact that participants rated the soft skill (punctuality) highly and the academic skill (numeracy/math) as non-essential does highlight the value placed on soft skills by key stakeholders.

The qualitative data (from both questionnaires and the interviews) caused us to revise our priority employability skills, as depicted in Table 5. The revised set, now comprising 16 skills, is organized around three themes: personal attributes; working collegially and collaboratively; and task focus and completion.

To integrate the proposed priority soft (employability) skills into students' education programmes, consideration must be given to the current life skills curriculum, where soft skills for open employment are somewhat diluted. While consciously over-simplifying the argument of this article, we suggest that a mere refocusing of programming language from 'life skills' to 'soft (employability) skills' has the potential to improve a student's navigational capacity, to see themselves as employable and in employment. Further, it would allow schools to communicate with organizations applying the language they use when recruiting employees.

While the value of soft skill development in mainstream education (compulsory and tertiary) has been researched over several decades, there is limited research on soft skill instruction for students with disability. Where data are available, they suggest that students do not necessarily maintain skills at the highest level learned, and the skills are not generalized to workplaces (Clark et al., 2019). Future research that examines the potential of school-based micro-businesses,

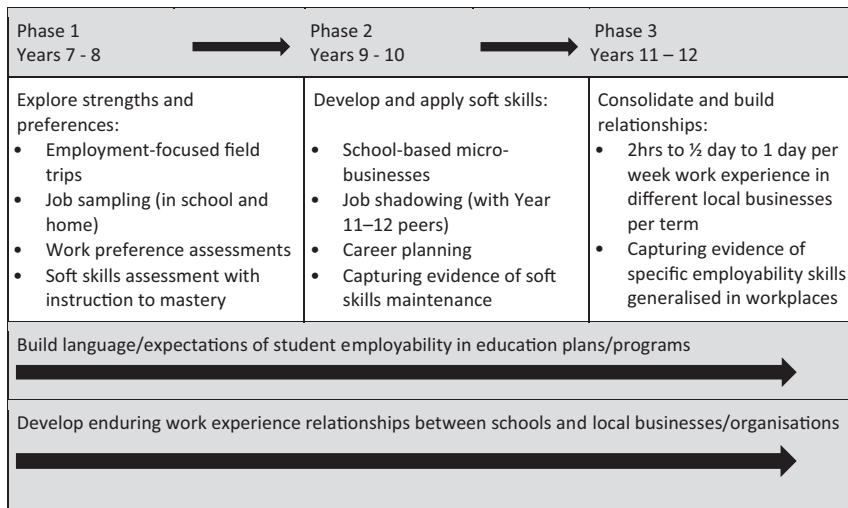
such as those described in this article, is needed to determine whether school-based micro-businesses that include some level of community engagement can (1) aid students in acquiring and mastering core soft skills; (2) subsequently bridge the maintenance and generalization gap for soft skills; and (3) provide the opportunity to identify work preferences. This is necessary not only for future employment but also to facilitate work experience during the school years, which, as detailed earlier, has been identified as necessary to prepare students for open employment.

Expecting students with ID to master the soft skills identified herein, see themselves as employable, and learn about work preferences within the confines of their special education setting is unrealistic. Within the school environment, other than casual community visits, student interactions are often limited to their peers and staff. Exploring opportunities for work experience during the school years to authentically apply and ideally generalize soft skills mastered at school, while also having the chance to identify work preferences, is critical.

To encapsulate the issues raised in this article related to soft skills development and the need to improve access to work experience opportunities, a general school-level model is proposed to guide the structure and sequence of activities that may support work exploration for students (see Figure 1).

The model commences with work exploration for all students from Year 7 (around 12–13 years of age). It moves away from the persistent 'train-then-place' logic and instead takes a strengths-based approach (Gjertsen et al., 2021). Work exploration activities during the early years of high school include assessment of both soft skills and also career preferences. The aim is to find the balance between the soft skills that would need to be explicitly taught and mastered and the types of work

FIGURE 1 Work exploration model for high school students with intellectual disability.



an individual would be likely to find fulfilling based on their innate qualities. Assessment to determine potential work preferences could take place during field trips that are focused on employment (for example, visits to common workplaces, such as nurseries, factories, cafés, hotels and supermarkets). In addition, school-based and home-based activities that focus on the component tasks within a specific career (such as gardening, cooking and making products) can provide a mechanism to identify work preferences and collect data to inform a student's individual employment exploration programme. During this period, special education teachers would engage evidence-based instructional strategies to support mastery of pertinent soft skills.

In Phase 2 (Years 9–10, around 14–16 years of age), the move is toward students applying soft skills in authentic contexts. Career planning based on the target careers identified in Phase 1 could be undertaken. What underlying skills and knowledge does the young person need to be successful in their preferred careers? What are the realistic employment opportunities based on the student's proposed post-school location/living arrangements, the location of relevant organizations and the levels of recruitment in a particular industry? How will family support, transport and other external factors affect employment options? During this time, students should have the opportunity to apply their skills in meaningful ways. Students could be engaged in school-based micro-businesses/enterprises and, where appropriate, shadow older peers who are successfully engaged in work experience activities. Data collection (for example, using video) that demonstrates a student's capabilities and their application of skills in a variety of contexts can provide the evidence needed by families and work experience employers to understand a student's potential.

Throughout Phases 1 and 2 (and beyond) focus should be on developing the language of employment and an expectation that the student is employable. If this language and these expectations are embedded into whole classes and individualized programmes, navigational capacity will improve for all.

The final phase is a period of consolidation and relationship building during which students would now engage in authentic work experience activities within their local communities. For this to occur, meaningful and enduring relationships between education providers and employers must be established. Data from the project suggest that securing work experience is currently a one-way endeavor, requiring schools to plead for placements. This needs to change. A starting point would be for organizations to work collaboratively with special educators to apply task analysis and identify components of tasks that could be undertaken by a student with ID with a flexible arrangement (Choiseul-Praslin & McConnell, 2020). Pragmatically, large organizations (such as local councils and large schools, as mentioned by participants) are needed, as they could facilitate many students from one

school attending together, which would be more efficient in terms of transport and school personnel required to attend with the students. It would also allow for key personnel in an organization to be properly educated to work effectively with young people with ID (for example, learning the fundamentals of explicit instruction) and continue to build and expand their knowledge as new and different students visit for work experience. Organizations with a Disability Action Plan should be held accountable for commitments made to improve rates of employment. This must include people with ID who are currently the most disadvantaged when it comes to open employment. Providing work experience placements could be the first step for these organizations and, ideally, lead to paid employment during the school years, which has been identified as a positive predictor of gaining competitive employment post-school (Southward & Kyzar, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The unemployment and underemployment of people with ID is a persistent global concern. Despite significant investment by governments toward employment support initiatives for people living with disability, the outlook for young people with ID seeking open employment is bleak. Building on existing literature, this article has presented research that supports the notion that greater emphasis should be put on developing soft skills in terms of employability, while building strategies to overcome the limited work experience opportunities available to students with ID.

The limitations of the study are noted. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted recruitment of participants and, as such, the number of stakeholders is relatively small. Regrettably, the voice of young people with ID is weak. This does not reflect the original research design but was a direct consequence of the pandemic being experienced at the time. Future research must address this major limitation by including more participants with lived experience of ID. Further, it is noted that the interview participants were all located in urban areas of Australia and, as such, do not reflect the experiences of educators working in rural or remote locations.

While there will never be a one-size-fits-all approach to work preparation, this small-scale study has contributed to the discussion by identifying numerous soft skills that might be used to underpin an individual student's work exposure programme and suggests a generic work exploration model to guide whole-class/school programming from the first to last year of high school. Of course, pedagogical strategies to develop specific work skills should be underpinned by empirical evidence (Rowe et al., 2021) and planning should reflect a person-centred ethos (Fayette & Bond, 2018).

To provide increased opportunities to develop soft (employability) skills and identify preferred work tasks/

careers, the development of micro-businesses within schools has emerged as an area for further research.

Organizations, beyond those with an existing relationship with the disability community, need to be more proactive in meeting their obligations as inclusive workplaces. This could commence by providing opportunities for work experience to students with ID during their school years.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The project adhered to human research ethics principles and received formal ethics clearance from the University of Technology Sydney (ETH19-4386).

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