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Research Paper

Exploring the social lives of young adults with disabilities



Explorer la vie sociale de jeunes adultes en situation de handicap

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the social lives of young adults with disabilities as they were transitioning from school to adult life. The young adults were former participants of the Access to Community Employment and Education Program (ACEE) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, a program, which focuses on the transition of young people with disabilities from school and youth to adulthood, employment, and independent living. The data in the article were drawn from a mixed method research project that explored, through a survey and follow-up focus groups and interviews, the impact of the ACEE program and the lived experiences of its alumni in the years after having completed the program. The study highlights the alumni's social lives, their leisure activities and their relationships and the different ways the participants are living their lives in the community several years after having completed the ACEE program. The data shows that the program is playing an important role in creating lasting friendships and a sense of belonging amongst its peers.

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R É S U M É

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Cet article explore la vie sociale de jeunes adultes en situation de handicap pendant leur transition de l'école vers la vie adulte. Les jeunes adultes faisaient partie du programme de transition « Access to Community Employment and Education (ACEE) » à Halifax en Nouvelle Écosse au Canada. Ce programme se focalise sur la transition de jeunes gens en situation de handicap de l'école vers la vie adulte, l'emploi et la vie autonome. Les données de l'article ont fait partie d'un plus grand projet de recherches utilisant des méthodes mixtes qui exploraient, à travers un questionnaire et des entretiens collectifs et individuels, l'impact du programme ACEE et l'expérience vécue par les participants après avoir terminé le programme ACEE. L'étude met en évidence les vies sociales, les activités de loisir, les relations et les différentes manières dont les participants vivent leurs vies en communauté plusieurs années après la fin du programme ACEE. Les données montrent que le programme joue un rôle important dans la création d'amitiés durables et d'un sentiment d'appartenance parmi les pairs.

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1. Social participation and people with disabilities

Despite recent efforts to move toward full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the broader society, people with disabilities continue to experience social exclusion, and most of their social networks are often largely comprised of family, support staff, and other people with disabilities (Lippold & Burns, 2009; Verdonshot, deWitte, Reichrath, Buntinx, & Curfs, 2009). Researchers have pointed to a number of factors that contribute to the relative isolation of this population and hinder social interaction and relationship-formation (Alwell & Cobb, 2009; Culley, 2010; Isaac, Raja, & Ravanan, 2010; Reichow & Volkmar, 2010).

On a global scale, numerous barriers to social participation continue to exist for people with disabilities, in terms of access to education in inclusive settings, of participation in the work force or in the general life in the community (see e.g. Cummins & Lau, 2003; Miles & Singal, 2010). Structural and cultural barriers appear in the “major areas of everyday life, such as education, employment, financial circumstances, the built environment, housing and transport, and leisure” (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, p. 98). Negative attitudes towards disabilities, ableist representations of people with disabilities to be diminished and incapable of having meaningful social relationships, financial considerations and reduced mobility lead to reduced access and opportunity to participate fully in social life.

Social inclusion is an important aspect of quality of life (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010). Schalock (1996), who has defined quality of life in relation to disability, conceptualizes quality of life as the degree to which an individual is satisfied with their life or perceives their life as “good”. Schalock has suggested that quality of life includes eight domains: physical well-being, interpersonal relations, material well-being, emotional well-being, self-determination, personal development, rights, and social inclusion (Schalock, 1996). Social inclusion has been defined in the field of disability as greater participation in community-based activities and a broader social network, although in wider society it also embraces other dimensions such as acting as consumers of goods and services or participation in economic and socially valued activities, such as employment and child-rearing (Burchardt et al., 2002, in Abbott & McConkey, 2006, p. 275).

Social networks are important facilitators of social inclusion (Abbott & McConkey, 2006; McConkey & Collins, 2010) and can contribute to quality of life (van Asselt-Goverts, Embregts, Hendriks, & Frielink, 2014). People with disabilities indicate that networks are important to them. Social networks are said to have both structural (size and frequency) and functional qualities (emotional and practical support) (Lunsky, 2006, in van Asselt-Goverts et al., 2014).

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