

CONTENT EXPERTISE

Vocational Rehabilitation Needs of Bahamian University Graduates With Disabilities Living in the Bahamas

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Assuring vocational rehabilitation programs in the Bahamas is a focus of practice and research because of the need to ensure inclusive working environments for persons with disabilities seeking employment. Bahamian university graduates with disabilities employment preparation methods are similar to those without disabilities, however, there are barriers and factors that would help to achieve competitive integrated employment significant to this group. A transcendental phenomenology qualitative research was conducted to describe the employment experiences of transition-aged Bahamian university graduates with disabilities from the perspectives of adults who either successfully navigated this transition or who still faced challenges with obtaining and/or maintaining employment. Criterion-based sampling was used, and 10 interviews were conducted in total. Three main themes—self-growth, disability inclusion, and advocacy—emerged from the data. Recommendations to improve employment services for university graduates with disabilities in the Bahamas are offered.

Advocates for persons with disabilities in the Bahamas have complained of widespread job discrimination and general apathy on the part of private employers and political leaders toward the need for training and equal opportunity (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2003). They noted that there was no general legislation to implement and enforce equal opportunity policies in the workplace, educational institutions, or elsewhere. To add, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services are nonexistent in the Bahamas, making it difficult for individuals with disabilities to navigate and transcend in these employment and educational arenas. Although the Bahamas' Persons with Disabilities Act (2014) was passed a few years ago, other than access to buildings (not policed), it would appear to have achieved very little.

The Bahamas' Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development, Disability Affairs Division, provides services, welfare, and support to the community of persons with disabilities throughout the Bahamas, none of which includes vocational support. The sheltered workshop, Abilities Unlimited, in Nassau, Bahamas makes it possible for adults with disabilities, excluding individuals with visual impairment, to develop vocational skill in furniture and ceramic manufacture and repair and to also have the opportunity to generate some income for providing these services (Bahamas

Local, 2022). However, few workers ever become competitively employed after entering sheltered workshops (Bellamy et al., 1986). The Government of the Bahamas Department of Labor serves as the leading sector for employability and job placement for Bahamians, yet there are no resources specifically available for persons with disabilities (Government of the Bahamas, 2011).

In many cases, graduates with disabilities enter the job market with limited knowledge about effective self-advocacy skills such as how to request job accommodations. This in part may be due to limited access to VR or disability inclusive career services. For instance, the University of the Bahamas (U.B.), the leading higher educational institution of the Bahamas, and the Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institution (BTVI), the first technical school in the Bahamas, offers general career and job placement services for its students, staff, faculty, and alumni (BTVI, 2022; U.B., 2017) but these services do not provide the distinctive tools needed to navigate the job market as a person with disabilities. Furthermore, the Bahamas Baptist Community College (BBCC) has no record of career or job placement services for students with and without disabilities.

Five out of 10 human resource professionals who have worked in human resources for at least ten years in the Bahamas expressed that there are no accommodations available for employees with learning disabilities in the Bahamas (Styles & Knowles, 2020). Further, seven out of these 10 human resource professionals confirmed that some form of discrimination exists when it comes to hiring people with learning disabilities in the Bahamas (Styles & Knowles, 2020).

Very little has been written on disability in the Caribbean; thus, it is difficult to draw any conclusions on overall trends in disability services, legislation, or employment in the region. As of 2020, all Caribbean countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and are therefore due to report on the status of implementation—though Caribbean countries have yet to go through the reporting process (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018).

Purpose of the Present Study

This study is the first to document how Bahamian university graduates with disabilities experience job search in the Bahamas. The purpose of this study is to describe the employment experiences of transition-aged university graduates with disabilities from the perspectives of adults who have either successfully navigated this transition or who are still facing challenges with obtaining and/or maintaining competitive integrated employment (CIE). As such, this study was specifically designed to the following three research questions:

1. How do transition-aged college or university graduates with disabilities experience preparation in relation to achieving CIE?

2. How do these individuals experience barriers in relation to achieving CIE?
3. What factors would be helpful in the process of pursuing CIE out of university?

Method

Participants

The study included five individuals. The five participants were university graduates with disabilities, aged 24-37, who experienced employment and/or job search since November 2014. The participants lived in the Bahamas at the time of this research. All five participants were Black Bahamians who had completed a 4-year university degree. The participants had a range of chronic illnesses and disabilities, including fibromyalgia, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment, and multiple sclerosis, most with developmental impact.

Moreover, all but one participant were females. Three participants were fully employed, one participant was a full-time graduate student and employed part-time, and one participant was unemployed and actively seeking employment. The characteristics of the participants are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Maintaining Participant Confidentiality

This study was approved by the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison Minimal Risk Research (MRR) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was determined to meet the criteria for exemption. Participants were asked to select a location to be interviewed that was most comfortable for them and each participant opted to be interviewed via Zoom. The names of the participants were changed to protect their privacy and provide confidentiality.

Instruments

The researcher conducted two semi-structured interviews consisting of 12-items per interview or a total of 24-items. The questions were developed by the researcher based on the research questions posed for this study and review of the literature. They focused on three topics, including (a) employment preparation, (b) employment barriers, and (c) employment/VR needs. The timeframe between each interview per participant varied. First and second interviews for the first, third, and fourth participants were completed one-week apart; for the second participant, one day apart; and for the fifth, two weeks apart.

Design: Transcendental Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology represents philosophical assumptions about experience and ways to organize and analyze phenomenological data (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). It provides a systematic approach to analyzing data about lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) and is useful when

Table 1. Participants Characteristics

Pseudo Name	Gender	Age	Age During Job Search	Nationality	Race	Disability	Marital Status	Living Status	Highest Degree	Employment Status	Annual Income
Tamara	Female	24	18-24	Bahamian	Black	Fibromyalgia	Never Married	Renting	4-year	Employed full-time	Less than \$10,000
Fiona	Female	27	25-34	Bahamian	Black	Cerebral Palsy	Never Married	With Parents	4-year	Unemployed	Less than \$10,000
Alexandra	Female	24	18-24	Bahamian	Black	Hearing Impaired	Never Married	With Parents	4-year	Employed full-time	\$20,000 - \$29,999
Natasha	Female	37	18-24	Bahamian	Black	Multiple Sclerosis	Married	With Parent	4-year	Employed full-time	\$30,000 - \$39,999
Conner	Male	27	18-24	Bahamian	Black	Cerebral Palsy	Never Married	With Parents	4-year	Employed part-time; Full-time graduate student	Less than \$10,000

a researcher has identified a phenomenon to understand and has individuals who could provide a description of what they experienced. Meaning is the core of this design which allowed the researcher to acquire and collect data that explicates the essences of the participants employment experience and in what context they experienced it. The fact that this transcendental phenomenological approach relies on individual experiences means that the context provided would be articulated from the participants' voices rather than from the researcher.

Procedure

A criterion-based sampling was used. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, and signed informed consent was obtained from all participants. To recruit participants, the researcher emailed the recruitment letter and flyer to 14 students with disabilities with whom she previously worked. Out of the 14 individuals who received the recruitment email, four completed the 24-item demographic survey and were eligible to participate in this study. Finally, the researcher asked individuals in her personal network (i.e., family members) to share the demographic survey with individuals who might meet the criteria for this study. Through this method, one eligible person completed the survey.

All five eligible persons who completed the demographic survey were emailed the informed consent and interview questions for their review. The researcher inquired about questions that participants might have about the study and interview questions. After receiving confirmation that there were no questions, the researcher proceeded to set a day and time to meet for the initial interview. Each participant agreed to meet via Zoom.

Interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the five participants via Zoom. The initial interviews averaged 40-minutes in length and the final interviews averaged 21-minutes in length. The semi-structured interviews conducted for this study explored the participants' personal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on the phenomena. From a phenomenological stance, specific situations and actions related to the phenomena were described by the participants, rather than general opinions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher developed full, detailed, and contextualized descriptions and perspectives on the employment experiences, including the preparation, barriers, and employment/VR needs of transition-age college/university graduates with disabilities.

Data Analysis

Audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim as soon as completed and were processed by relistening to the interview recording to enhance the transcript's accuracy. The researcher conducted a member check by sending a copy of the interview transcripts to each respective participant. After

sharing the interview transcripts with respective participants, no revisions were requested except in the case of one participant for whom, due to unclear sections in the interview recording, it was necessary to request the participant review and fill in missing data that was not picked up in the Transcribe App.

The transcripts were analyzed and interpreted by the researcher using broadly qualitative data summarization and analysis methods including data organization and management, immersive engagement, and writing representation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021); and a transcendental phenomenological approach including epoché, horizontalization or textural meaning, and thematic analysis (Moustakas, 1994). After careful analysis of the data, codes were assigned to similar elements and developed into three broad themes.

Data Saturation

It is important to note that this process iterated back and forth between data collection and ongoing analysis until each category reached data saturation. That was when additional data became repetitive, and no longer provided new insight in response to the research questions. Saturation was achieved when no new data was identified after the tenth interview. For instance, research question one on employment preparation data saturation occurred when the responses “help from friends and family” and “update resume” were mentioned sequentially. For research question two on employment barriers, data saturation occurred when the responses “inaccessible buildings” and “COVID-19 pandemic” were mentioned sequentially. For research requestion three on factors that would be helpful in the process of pursuing CIE, data saturation occurred when “hands-on/on-the-job experience” was mentioned sequentially.”

Avoiding Researcher Bias

To prevent researcher bias, the researcher first conducted two interviews per participant to support an effective and feasible method to verify or cross-check interviewee responses. Second, the researcher avoided asking leading or probing questions throughout the study’s interviews that would direct the participants to respond in a narrowed or biased way.

Third, to prevent researcher bias, the researcher transcribed interview responses verbatim, which provided rich data that were not misleading. The researcher solicited feedback from participants about the data and conclusions in order to rule out misinterpretation. Finally, the researcher implemented methodological triangulation, which involved the collection of data from various angles, to prevent researcher bias (Denzin, 1970–2009, p. 2009).

Results

From the data, themes emerged regarding employment preparation, employment barriers, and factors that would be helpful in the process of pursuing CIE. Data analysis revealed three main themes: (a) self-growth,

(b) disability inclusion, and (c) advocacy. Additional subthemes included social support and self-determination, under the first theme; reasonable accommodation and equal opportunity under the second theme; and transition services and disability-awareness under the third theme.

Theme 1: Self-growth

Participants engaged in self-growth by taking personal initiative or being self-determined to prepare for employment, and they also relied on a social network throughout this process. Participants' social support system was predominantly populated by members of their immediate and extended families, friends, significant others, peers, and professionals (i.e. counselor, job placement officer). Self-determination operated as an extension of social support. For instance, participants recognized that there were some limitations to the kind of support and insight their friends, family, and peers could have provided as persons without disabilities therefore, it was up to them to take initiative and see their own employment aspirations into fruition. This meant, participants maintained a level of accountability by ensuring their resumes were always up to date, personally reaching out to potential employers, taking additional courses to develop their skills, and learning how to effectively answer interview questions. It is important to mention, all participants learned how to answer interview questions through independent research of commonly asked interview questions and with the help of someone from their social support network. This specific act of employment preparation in the form of interview preparation demonstrated the versatility of self-growth to include both social support and self-determination.

Self-growth constituted a common employment preparation approach expressed by all participants whether reference was made to receiving help from family and friends, skill and resume building, and forming external connections. Having a disability meant participants needed to acquire additional levels of learning and training to adequately prepare for a self-sufficient future. The theme of *self-growth* encompassed supporting sub-themes that emerged from the data: social support and self-determination.

Social Support

Social support was a relevant sub-theme to explore in relation to self-growth. Participants collectively identified both parents, mother, father, and cousin when asked to describe who helped them during the time they were searching for employment.

When asked, "Who did you ask for help?", one participant clearly expressed how her mother played a major role in helping her to prepare for employment resulting in her obtaining a job as an administrative assistant. Tamara's experience with employment preparation was essentially a favorable one since her mother worked as an employment placement officer. She mentioned how her mother had the resources to connect with different employers throughout the Bahamas while advocating on her behalf. Having

a resourceful mother contributed to Tamara's ability to gain and maintain employment as a university graduate with a disability and to live independently. Tamara did not experience long-term unemployment compared to the other participants. Tamara stated:

My mom is very resourceful so even if I didn't ask, she will always give me the type of support I need in knowing what type of preparation I needed, what documents that I need to have and how to go into the interview. (Tamara, final interview, December 23, 2022)

Tamara's response was interpreted as her having gratitude for the ongoing informational and instrumental support provided by her mother. She recognized that her experience with employment preparation was unique and advantageous where if one employment opportunity did not work out, she was able to immediately apply for another job through her mother's position as an employment placement officer. For instance, Tamara shared that she was employed throughout her entire university studies. On the other hand, Fiona remained unemployed despite the support received from more experienced family members. Fiona's long-term unemployment was interpreted as the result of her having cerebral palsy that visibly impacts her fine and gross motor skills. When asked who she sought help from as she prepared for employment, Fiona too described help from family, although specific family members were not identified. She stated:

I tried to seek out individuals, especially my friends, family members, and also on LinkedIn to an extent because they have more life experience than I do, especially like when it comes to looking for employment and they've had previous jobs, so they know mainly what to look for. (Fiona, final interview, December 30, 2022)

Fiona further shared that she would ask members of her social network, including her family, for help every few weeks or months on what they thought about job postings or companies. Fiona recognized that her family and some of her friends were more knowledgeable on what was required to successfully achieve employment in the Bahamas so, it was imperative for her to stay in close contact and allow them to assist her with preparing for employment.

Alexandra responded to the question about who she asked for help by referencing her parents, significant other, family friends, and a cousin. This social network provided support through job recommendations which helped her to be aware of potential job openings to prepare for employment. She stated:

In terms of employment preparation, I want to emphasize that I didn't do all the work by myself. I had people recommending things to me, whether that was my parents, my boyfriend, I think one was a family friend of ours, and my cousin. (Alexandra, final interview, January 6, 2023)

Alexandra further reflected on a specific occasion of asking her mother for help with obtaining an original copy of her birth certificate to submit with a job application. She stated:

In terms of securing the documentation needed, I did have my mom help because I would've encountered one [a job] that required a birth certificate; and that's not something that we had on hand at the time. We did acquire a copy, but, that particular place of employment wanted the originals. (Alexandra, final interview, January 6, 2023)

Alexandra also mentioned how her mother and father were aware of jobs she was applying for and would suggest additional places for her to consider. She stated, "She [my mother] and my father would've been aware of where I was applying to and would've then come up with suggestions or places to look out for" (Alexandra, final interview, January 6, 2023). Additionally, her cousin recommended two places for her to submit job applications and gave insight on how it may be working at those places. She stated, "I know I did have a cousin mention two other places to apply and an idea what it would've been like if she had experience working with those places" (Alexandra, final interview, January 6, 2023). Based on Alexandra's responses, she received familial support from immediate and extended family members who made sure she had the correct job required documents and knew which companies were hiring. In moments where she was unable to self-operate throughout the employment preparation process, she sought council from more experienced individuals in her family. Alexandra confirmed the importance of having a familial network by allowing those close to her to provide assistance and knowledge.

Conner shared how he asked his father for help on one or two occasions when he was faced with a situation that he had limited knowledge on. He stated, "My dad assisted me with a lot of the information. If it was something I did not know, I would ask him to help me on a question that I need" (Conner, final interview, February 2, 2023). After sharing how he received help from his father, Conner also emphasized his independence and preference for getting things done alone but, he is open to help when needed. This was interpreted as Conner's father playing an active role in Conner's employment preparation process while maintaining healthy boundaries by permitting Conner the autonomy to essentially make his own decisions. On-demand informational support from Conner's father was how Conner prepared for employment.

Like Conner, Natasha was also determined to land a job independently but eventually received help from her father who directed her to a specific person in the government to submit her job application to. For instance, Natasha initially engaged in numerous job searches and was turned down for reasons she believed may have been related to her having multiple sclerosis. Natasha stated, “My dad, he turned me onto someone in terms of putting in the application, but I basically did it all on my own” (Natasha, initial interview, January 4, 2023). After utilizing this instrumental support and sourcing channel, Natasha successfully landed a job. This was interpreted as employers in the Bahamas being more likely to hire individuals who they are familiar with either directly or through third-party connection. Natasha leveraged her personal connections and obtained a job based on who her father knew.

Participants responses to how they prepared for employment were generally interpreted as the importance of having access to various forms of support and resources that could enable positive change in one’s employment endeavors. Having access to employment resources could potentially help transition-age university graduates with disabilities gain social support, as well as information, knowledge, and exposure that they may not be likely to achieve independently. Based on the responses, access to support and resources has the potential to facilitate the formation of work opportunities for university graduates with disabilities.

More specifically, three participants collectively identified significant other, best friend, close circle of friends, family friends, and former classmates when asked to describe who helped them during the time they were searching for employment. When asked, who did she asked for help during the employment preparation process, Fiona expressed how her close circle of friends and some family friends played a role in assisting her to prepare for employment by providing informational support. She stated:

I mostly spoke to my close circle of friends and some family friends. They kinda gave me insight on how I could structure my resume in such a way that it would be attractive to employers or that it might attract employer’s attention. (Fiona, initial interview, December 28, 2022)

Fiona further explained the importance of maintaining relationships with friends and peers and the unique social network support provided by this close circle. She shared how both her and her friends are in the same climate of searching for employment. This was interpreted as Fiona being part of a specific network that shared similar interests or were in similar situations as her. Consequently, Fiona would ask her close circle of friends about jobs they came across and steps they took to land the job. She stated:

I would ask family members and mainly friends because they, especially my friends, we're in the climate now where we're either employed or looking for jobs. So, I would ask them what jobs they would come across; how did they get the job or what steps did they take? And I would kind of acclimate them to my own experience. (Fiona, final interview, December 30, 2022)

This was interpreted as Fiona not only regarding avenues her friends took that may have contributed to their employment success, but also still recognizing the uniqueness of her employment experience. This meant Fiona modified the job search recommendations received from her friends to suit her personal experience. She recognized that there were some limitations to the kind of informational support provided by friends and peers, and that it was important for her to utilize strategic planning involving her taking a holistic view of her situation, needs, and employment goals.

When asked who she asked for help from, Alexandra explained the importance of communicating with friends and peers to accomplish employment goals. She stated:

I had people recommending things to me, whether that was parents, my boyfriend, and a family friend of ours. So, it's important to kind of voice your interest to people in your circle to assist you because, by no means, the one [job] that I ended up working for was not found on my own online or anything like that. So, you would really greatly limit yourself if you only depend on online sources to provide you with employment. (Alexandra, final interview, January 6, 2023)

Alexandra's response was interpreted as her recognizing how influential various forms of social support are to achieving employment. If she did not engage her network, she admitted she would not have obtained a job. Alexandra further explained how she joined clubs that helped her to make decisions concerning her career aspirations. She stated:

I've also asked persons around me if they became aware of any openings to let me know. I was also a part of some clubs and class groups at university that had begun to post job openings as well. So, a combination of those factors, I could say contributed to job search preparation. (Alexandra, initial interview, December 29, 2022)

Alexandra maintained a resourceful social network of friends and peers that helped her to prepare for employment. Alexandra recognized that employment preparation required intentional methods of networking that would require in-person social interactions and personal relationships.

Additionally, Conner leveraged his personal relationship with his best friend. He shared that, in addition to receiving help from his father, his best friend helped him with mock interviewing. He stated:

My dad assisted me with a lot of the information. If it was something I did not know, I would ask him to help me on a question that I need, and also, my best friend who helped me a lot. She assisted me with the job interview process also.
(Conner, final interview, February 2, 2023)

Participants' job preparation activities were clearly influenced and supported by social support networking, where efforts were made through interaction with people who shared similar interests and motives to help achieve employment goals. Participants capitalized on their close network of immediate friends, peers, and former classmates to enhance employment opportunities.

One participant, Tamara, identified a counselor and employment placement officer (who was also her mother) when asked to describe who helped her to prepare for employment. Tamara initially described instrumental and informational support she received from a counselor. She stated:

I needed financial help. So, through there I was able to get in contact with a counselor and she just gave me some helpful advice that I used in my interview. Because when I interviewed at the Children's Home, they were looking for certain things and I didn't really go in that prepared. But once I fell back on the advice I got from that counselor, I was able to answer the questions that they needed with more fluidity and clarity.
(Tamara, final interview, December 23, 2022)

It was interpreted that Tamara received informational support from the counselor through happenstance. She initially needed instrumental financial help as a result of being unemployed and sought assistance from a counselor. Through communication and sharing employment concerns with this counselor, Tamara received advice that helped her to be more prepared for her next job interview. Tamara also received instrumental and informational assistance from her mother who works as an employment placement officer. She stated, "My mother, she works at Department of Labor, so she helps people get jobs and she help them with the interview process and everything. So, that made me very knowledgeable" (Tamara, initial interview, December 16, 2022). It was interpreted that although the employment placement officer was Tamara's mother, she was still receiving a service. Through this career provided service, Tamara became informed on various aspects of job search and preparation.

Tamara's overall experience with receiving support from professionals throughout her job preparation process was interpreted as instrumental, informational, and emotional support. For instance, valuable aspects of a professional counselor's job would be to provide support involving service, helpful advice, and empathy to clients experiencing hard times. In Tamara's case, financial hardships led her to seek professional help from a counselor. Additionally, considering the employment placement officer was Tamara's mother, it would be natural for this "professional" to not only extend instrumental and informational support, but to also extend emotional support during this process. For instance, Tamara shared how her mother encourages her. She stated, "she's also very encouraging of me, letting them [employers] know that I have this challenge because it's not something that only affects me physically, but also mentally it makes it hard for me to concentrate" (Tamara, initial interview, December 16, 2022). This was interpreted as a bond between Tamara and her mother beyond professionalism and involved deeply motivated care, love, and concern.

Self-Determination

In the context of transition from tertiary education to employment for college/university graduates with disabilities, self-determination was a relevant sub-theme of self-growth to explore. When graduating from college/university and preparing for employment, one must determine the kind of life he/she wants and become the primary causal agent for these post-secondary education outcomes. Participants collectively identified completing additional courses, reviewing past lessons, and practicing answering interview questions when asked to describe their level of preparation for employment after graduating from college/university.

Fiona shared how she would come across jobs and companies that pique her interest and if she does not have the relevant experience, she would update her skills. For example, Fiona expressed that she is seeking job opportunities in compliance and is currently completing a compliance course. She stated:

I would send out emails saying that I'm interested in any future opportunities, for example, in compliance, because I'm doing a compliance course now. So, I would look for mainly jobs in that area, or a legal secretary or legal assistant, areas like that. (Fiona, final interview, December 30, 2022)

Fiona took the initiative of carving a specific career path for herself in compliance through continuing education. However, although interested in compliance, she was still open to other law-related job opportunities. Natasha further explained how she would review past lessons from her time as a university student. She stated:

What I did was basically run over what I had studied in school because I was not sure what area they was gonna put me in; and just build my confidence knowing what I was fighting with prior to the employment. (Natasha, final interview, January 11, 2023)

This response was interpreted as Natasha considering herself at a disadvantage due to her having multiple sclerosis. Consequently, she strived to refresh her memory on what she learned in university. Reviewing past course material helped Natasha to become more confident as she pursued employment. Both Fiona and Natasha experience with employment preparation was interpreted as continuing education. Continuing education has the potential to expose individuals to new knowledge as well as solidify existing knowledge. As a result of being equipped with knowledge and skills relevant to one's career interest, individuals would pursue employment with confidence. Further, Alexandra and Conner similarly shared that they researched and practiced interview questions. When asked to describe step by step what was done to prepare for employment when they came across a job opening that met their career interest, Alexandra elaborated on the process she went through to prepare for interview questions. She stated:

Before I got to my interview, I would've practiced interview questions so that I could kind of practice my answers in a way. Of course, there are questions that you can't prepare for, like the skill-set oriented ones. So, for example, if they pose a question for you to solve, like "what would you do in the scenario?" or "what is wrong with this picture?" then those are things you cannot really prepare for and you have to just use what you've learned up to that point to answer it. But outside of that, the more general ones, you can definitely prepare for that by practicing with someone in your family and also googling most common interview questions." (Alexandra, final interview, January 6, 2023)

In addition to Conner asking his dad for help with preparing for employment, he also participated in mock interviews with his best friend. Conner stated:

If it was something I did not know, I would ask him [dad] to help me on a question that I need; and also, my best friend who helped me a lot. She assisted me with the job interview process also. (Conner, final interview, February 2, 2023)

Alexandra and Conner's focus on job interview preparation was interpreted as them recognizing areas they may have a weakness in, such as communication skills, and working to improve their ability to respond effectively to interview questions. Conner has trouble with his speech and

Alexandra has trouble with her hearing. Therefore, enhancing interview skills was interpreted as being important for both participants to alleviate stress and boost confidence.

Resume building was identified by three participants. When asked to describe step by step what she did to prepare for employment, Tamara responded that her first step was to update her resume. She stated:

I've always been the type of person to just always have an updated resume. So, if you want to include it as a step, I'll just call that my first step. You'll just consider it always having a resume ready. (Tamara, final interview, December 23, 2022)

Tamara's response was self-explanatory and emphasized the importance of always having an updated resume available for potential recruiters. Tamara's response was also interpreted as her being actively organized, a skill most likely learned from her mother the employment placement officer. A well-formatted resume has the potential to increase one's chances at employment by showing recruiters organizational skills from the onset. Conner shared how he would send his resume to specific jobs that he wanted and while he waited for a response, he would continue to update his resume. He stated:

I sent out my resume to the specific jobs that I wanted and then I waited on a response from them. And then in the meantime, while I wait for a response, I continue to update my resume, continue to research on a particular company or organization that I wanted to go in until they give me a call and I just put everything in God's hand. (Conner, final interview, February 2, 2023)

Conner appeared to be in a constant back and forth between submitting and updating his resume. He mentioned how he also researched companies while building his resume which was interpreted as him revising his resume to fit the specific goals or job requirements of a company. When asked about her level of preparation for employment after graduating from university, Fiona also shared how she constructed her resume. She stated:

After I got my LLB, what I actually started to do was put together my resume with my past work experience and the qualifications that I would've gotten up until then. But I didn't have a lot of work experience. I only had like one summer job. (Fiona, initial interview, December 28, 2022)

Since Fiona had limited work experience, her resume was interpreted as not being competitive. Nonetheless, it was evident that organizing her resume was one of the first steps Fiona took to prepare for employment. Resume building was interpreted as the participants keeping abreast of skills, abilities, and experience that has the potential to qualify them for a job. By

continuously updating their resume, it was evident that participants were active contributors of their job search and were highly aware of which career path they wanted to pursue.

Theme 2: Disability Inclusion

Although participants utilized self-growth preparation tools through social support and self-determination, while pursuing competitive employment, they all experienced employment barriers that represented elements of limited inclusion for persons with disabilities. College/university graduates with disabilities in the Bahamas initially reported adequate preparatory efforts towards achieving employment however, these efforts were made futile in an environment that does not practice and endorse disability inclusion. Based on participants' reports, it appeared that the absence of disability inclusion was the one element that adversely impacted college/university graduates with disabilities in the Bahamas job search and employment experience. Improving one's self-growth, as documented in the first theme, to only be rejected or disregarded by employers in a country that has passed the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities) Act 2014 is problematic and discouraging.

Lack of disability inclusion constituted a common employment barrier expressed by all participants with reference being made to inaccessibility, limited accommodations, the COVID-19 pandemic, and no employer response. All participants of this study completed tertiary education and pursued post-tertiary professional development to increase their chances of employability and were therefore qualified for hiring. However, the inclusion of persons with disabilities does not stop at hiring but extends to the provisions of reasonable accommodations and the furtherance of equal opportunities. The broad theme of *disability inclusion* encompassed supporting sub-themes that emerged from the data: reasonable accommodation and equal opportunity.

Reasonable Accommodation

Three participants identified inaccessible buildings and work environments as a barrier in relation to achieving CIE. For instance, when asked to describe a job interview that he went on after graduating from university, Conner shared his experience with unfortunate circumstances of being turned away from potential employers who were unwilling to create an accessible workspace for him. Employers blatantly disregarded the Bahamas' disability law and violated Conner's right to a barrier-free environment. Conner stated:

Many of the job interviews that I went on, they did not have elevators. The work environment was not suitable for persons who are in a wheelchair or with a disability. So many of the times that I went on the job interview, it was difficult for me to move around. And one of the things that many of the persons that I went on the job interview, they say, "we would like to hire you, you are a good person, you will be good for our company,

but due to the environment not being suitable for you to move around or for you to be able to work effectively, we cannot hire you". (Conner, final interview, February 2, 2023)

Based on Conner's experience with inaccessibility, it was interpreted that the companies he interviewed with did not value persons with disabilities nor have policies in place to protect the rights of applicants and employees with disabilities. The employer admitted to Conner being qualified for the job position but rejected him because of his disability and what it may entail. This was interpreted as limited disability-awareness on behalf of the companies, limited advocacy intervention for applicants with disabilities, and limited ability to self-advocate on his own behalf. When asked to describe barriers experienced while searching for employment, Tamara shared how her place of employment did not have elevators, and although they recognized guests with disabilities, they did not recognize employees with disabilities. She stated:

The resort that I work in now, they don't have an elevator and there's stairs you have to get to, to get to the rooms. So, when I'm showing guests, I have to make that task up. So, I'd say that even if there isn't anyone currently in your employee that have a disability, I'd always say prepare for that. They do have a disability accessible guest room, but they're not really thinking about an employee who might need that. (Tamara, initial interview, December 16, 2022)

Tamara further shared how she does not expect her employer to install an elevator for one person and revealed that her employers are also inconsiderate of guests with disabilities who may want to be accommodated on or have access to top floors. She stated:

My manager knows that I have trouble with the stairs, so, when there's a guest coming in who's going on the top floor, she doesn't require me to go up there. So, the only time that I do find myself up the stairs is if my manager is off; and that's only one day a week and it's not every week. So that's the closest thing that can come to an accommodation but, they can't really change it cause it's a small place. So, to say that they are gonna build an elevator just for me, can't really say that. (Tamara, initial interview, December 16, 2022)

This response was interpreted as limited knowledge of the Bahamas Disability Act 2014 that requires all buildings to be accessible for persons with disabilities. The law further describes that if these businesses and establishments do not comply, they could be subject to imprisonment or a fine. The fact that Tamara's place of employment stays in business and avoids incompliance with law penalties reveals that the law is not being

properly mandated. It was also evident that Tamara experienced difficulty with advocating on her behalf. Her mother provided advocacy intervention which helped her land a job, but self-advocacy skills are needed to help Tamara maintain her job and experience overall job satisfaction. Self-advocacy would require Tamara to be able to effectively communicate her disability needs. Further, Natasha, when asked to describe her experience with accessing her work building, shared how because of her multiple sclerosis, the heat could become unbearable. Living in the Bahamas where there are high temperatures and where it is common to experience blackouts, heat is almost unavoidable and extra precaution is needed for Natasha. She stated:

The most uncomfortable thing for me would be when the air condition isn't working because when the air conditioning wasn't working, that's when I had my worst relapse. Cause like I always tell people, what normal people would feel in heat, in humidity I'm probably feeling 10 to 20 degrees higher than that. (Natasha, final interview, January 11, 2023)

Natasha's experience with inaccessibility was interpreted as her being subjected to a work environment that has a non-functioning air conditioning system. More awareness on employees who have disabilities, and its symptoms could help employers be better prepared in terms of maintaining an accessible work environment and providing immediate solutions for occurrences of inaccessibility.

Limited accommodation was identified by three participants. When asked to describe accommodations received or not received from potential employers, Fiona initially shared how she conducted her first interview via Zoom which did not require her to go into office. However, when it was time for her to go into the office, employers did not respond to her disability accommodation needs. She stated:

The human resource manager didn't really bring up my disability per se, but a few days before when she sent out the employment form for me to actually fill out, I did describe my disability as best I could. So, they were aware of it, but they didn't naturally bring it up per se. (Fiona, initial interview, December 28, 2022)

This experience made Fiona curious about whether her disability would impact her chances of landing the job. Fiona also stated, "It just kind of left me curious as to whether this would be a major factor in deciding for, at least on their part, them deciding whether I would be a good candidate for the job" (Fiona, initial interview, December 28, 2022). She further shared how she did not bring up her disability to the human resource manager either. She stated:

Well, honestly, from what I could remember from the interview, I didn't really bring it up myself, but I did figure this might go into some kind of consideration when they're thinking of, okay, am I a good candidate or not? Would this fit with our specifications of what we need to do for the position? (Fiona, initial interview, December 28, 2022)

Based on Fiona's response, it was interpreted that she thought it acceptable for the employer's decision to hire her be grounded, for the most part, on her disability rather than on her skills and qualifications. Fiona has cerebral palsy that visibly impacts her fine and gross motor skills. However, the human resource manager did not inquire about her ability to perform specific portions of the job. This was interpreted as the human resource manager having limited skill and knowledge in communicating with applicants who have visible disabilities. When asked about the kind of support available or missing at her place of employment, Alexandra shared her struggle with capturing everything that was discussed in her work meetings but was told she could not take notes. A solution provided by her supervisor was to take minutes, however, minutes were not consistently taken and made available for her. This inconsistency in work accommodation resulted in Alexandra taking on what was interpreted as a defeated attitude. She stated:

When I have conversations with persons personally, like I said, they repeat themselves if needed be. I know the person I work closely with had wanted me to stop taking notes during the conversation. So, I said, well, I need to have notes on what was said so I can remember and recall. And as a solution for that, she had opted to do like minutes. And that had happened for some meetings, not all meetings, but some meetings that had happened. If your request got lost and you repeat it, if it's important enough to repeat and you repeat it, it still isn't addressed, then it's not really more you can do, you know, at that point. (Alexandra, final interview, January 6, 2023)

Meeting minutes were important for Alexandra who has a hearing impairment. She voiced to her supervisor challenges she experienced with her disability and accommodations she needed to work effectively. Her supervisor, however, did not demonstrate consistent disability support. Requesting the same accommodations (e.g., meeting minutes) for the same work situations every time was interpreted as a tedious task for Alexandra. She also shared how she was not provided with a work telephone although every other employee had a telephone. She stated:

I had just disclosed to them my hearing challenges so that they were aware. So, it wasn't like a surprise, but I didn't go into depth about it. So, when I got on the job, I think it's just by how it was designed, but I didn't have a telephone, and I didn't

want to have a telephone, really, because that's not my strongest suit, really. So, I have picked up a few [telephone] lines, but they were generally for other people, if that makes sense. (Alexandra, initial interview, December 29, 2022)

Alexandra further shared that whenever she is provided with a work telephone, she would like to use a specialized telephone for individuals with hearing impairments, but it was not a conversation she had with her employers yet. She stated:

I don't have a telephone, so that's not an issue. But when I do get one, I would like to look into the specialized telephones that they have for persons who hearing impaired. It's not a conversation I had yet. (Alexandra, initial interview, December 29, 2022)

Alexandra, not being provided with a telephone by her employers or given the opportunity to discuss or decide on whether she would like a telephone was interpreted as the lack of equal opportunity in her workplace. It was not a priority for Alexandra's employers to ensure she was receiving fair or the same treatment as her colleagues regarding knowing everything that transpired in work meetings and having a work telephone. It was interpreted that Alexandra's employer assumed that she is incapable of using a telephone. Moreover, when asked to describe barriers experienced while searching for employment, Conner shared:

The barrier I feel searching for a job was that many persons didn't want to hire me because they felt my disability would have affected me working. So, although I had the qualifications, although there wasn't anything wrong with me, the biggest barrier I feel that affected me getting the job was people's mindset of my disability. (Conner, initial interview, January 20, 2023)

Conner's excerpt was interpreted as the absence of disability-awareness and inclusion being elements that adversely impacted his employment experience. Lack of disability inclusion constituted a common employment barrier expressed by participants with reference being made to limited accommodations and unfair treatment. Participants completed tertiary education and upskilled to increase their chances of employability and were qualified to be considered for hiring. However, the inclusion of persons with disabilities does not stop at hiring but extends to the provisions of reasonable accommodations and the furtherance of equal opportunities.

Equal Opportunity

Natasha job searched in year 2009 as a qualified university graduate with multiple sclerosis and had the following to say about being a qualified person with a disability seeking employment:

Basically, all the government agencies told me I was overqualified and that I needed to go someplace else. Even one of my retired supervisors told me I had interviewed at the wrong place. So, that dropped my self-esteem. It kind of had me in a state of depression. So, it took me a while to try and build up that self-confidence. (Natasha, initial interview, January 4, 2023)

Natasha's experience appeared to be unrelated to her disability but more focused on her post-educational attainments. She was frankly denied equal opportunity to employment based on her qualifications. It would be interesting to further explore if she would have received the same response of being considered overqualified if she did not identify as one with multiple sclerosis.

There was clear evidence from the transcripts that disability inclusion was highly dependent on equality of opportunity for people with disabilities. In the interviews conducted, participants brought up their experiences with potential employers and their reluctance to provide them with the opportunity to work. Although participants admitted to randomly applying to companies that were not advertising job openings, limited opportunities were predominant in some cases. Tamara stated that after describing her fibromyalgia disability to a potential employer, they stated that they did not think she was physically capable of the job's tasks and opted to go with a male candidate. Fiona expressed her frustration with not hearing back from employers after submitting her resume and applications. Since graduating from university in 2019, Fiona received just one job interview opportunity.

Even in certain jobs where I figured I might be qualified for or at least fit some of the criteria for, a lot of the time I wouldn't really hear back from employers. I feel as if employers should at least respond to the candidate to let them know whether they got the job or not, rather than, you know, no response at all. (Fiona, initial interview, December 28, 2022)

By law, the Bahamas is obliged to protect the rights of Bahamians with disabilities, specifically those who are qualified for suitable employment opportunities. All participants described their disability on the job applications submitted for job positions in their fields of study. Although three participants gained full-time employment, the practice of equality of opportunity was questioned based on their responses to the interview questions on employment barriers. For instance, Alexandra reported that

she described her challenges with hearing to her employers before being hired. Once hired, she mentioned she was not provided with a telephone, although every other employee had one. She talked about how there are specialized telephones for individuals with hearing impairments, that she personally used, but it was not a conversation she had with her employers yet. Alexandra, not being provided with a telephone by her employers or given the opportunity to discuss or decide on whether she would like a telephone did not promote equal opportunity in her workplace setting. Alexandra's experience with reasonable accommodation tied into her experience with equal opportunities. She shared how tedious it was to request the same accommodation (e.g. meeting minutes) for the same work situations every time. She talked about how she struggled with capturing everything that was discussed in her work meetings but was told she could not take notes. A solution provided by her supervisor to this issue was to take minutes, however, minutes were not consistently taken and made available for her. It was not a priority for Alexandra's employers to ensure she was receiving fair or the same treatment as her colleagues regarding knowing everything that transpired in work meetings.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic substantially influenced employers in some of the decisions they made regarding applicants and employees with disabilities. According to Conner, "more jobs because of the COVID-19 pandemic were reluctant to hire persons with disabilities" (Conner, final interview, February 2, 2023).

From his perspective, this reluctance of employers to hire persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic was due to the "fear that persons with disabilities would be a hinderance to their company" (Conner, final interview, February 2, 2023).

All participants revealed incidents where employers were not entirely inclusive of them as persons with disabilities and failed to provide equality of opportunities for them as qualified applicants and/or employees with disabilities. This unfair treatment between employees with and without disabilities exemplified discriminatory acts that goes against the Act 2014 and essentially the Constitution of the Bahamas (2006). The Bahamian transition-aged college/university graduates with disabilities of this study reported experiences where their right to equal opportunity in the workplace was denied. This was documented as an employment barrier in relation to achieving CIE and revealed the Bahamas' ongoing struggle with providing equal opportunity for all despite their disability.

Theme 3: Advocacy

Based on the responses collected from the participants of this study, it was interpreted that in order for advocacy-related initiatives to be effective, employers must be willing to step outside of their comfort zones with regards to disability and all that it entails. Stepping out of one's comfort zone requires an open-mind, effort, and the desire to develop deeper awareness on unfamiliar topics. Through awareness of disabilities, employers would

gain insight on these individuals' work-related experiences. Employers would also establish their organization to be better equipped to serve persons with disabilities. Advocacy for persons with disabilities in the workplace was often neglected due to limited awareness of this group's experience with employment. Even further, transition-aged college/university graduates with disabilities are disadvantaged in terms of not having access to the essential transition tools or transition services needed to better prepare them for competitive employment in the Bahamas.

As previously mentioned, the transition from tertiary education to employment and self-sufficiency presented substantial barriers for new college/university graduates with disabilities living in the Bahamas. Participants of this study reported experiences of employment barriers related to disability inclusion and then shared their perspective on services and resources that should be implemented to encourage the consistent provision of reasonable accommodation and equal opportunity for applicants and employees with disabilities.

All participants highlighted advocacy as an overarching factor that would be helpful in the process of Bahamian college/university graduates with disabilities pursuing CIE out of college/university. Advocacy constituted a common factor expressed by all participants with reference made to work experience, job training/programs/seminars, career counseling, addressing employer biases, and accessibility. The competitive employment outcome of college/university graduates with disabilities in the Bahamas would essentially be influenced by advocacy-related initiatives. The theme of *advocacy* encompassed supporting sub-themes that emerged from the data: transition services and disability-awareness

Transition Services

In the interviews conducted, participants voiced the need for services and resources that would help them to transition smoothly and effectively from college/university to CIE. Participations mentioned various components of what a transition service would entail including seminars, job programs and training, on-the-job experience, and career counseling. Work Experience was identified by three participants as a factor that would be helpful in the process of pursuing CIE. When asked about resources and services that should be put in place in the Bahamas to serve university graduates with disabilities in securing employment, Conner shared how it would help if persons with disabilities are provided with more work experience. He stated:

As it relates to universities and colleges, is simply giving us hands-on experience. One of my biggest essence is that experience is the best teacher. Although I felt prepared in many areas, the reason why I say I felt unprepared in other areas, it's because of the hands-on experience. (Conner, initial interview, January 20, 2023)

When asked specifically about factors that would be helpful in the process of pursuing CIE out of college/university, Conner also stated:

One of the biggest things that I think would help persons with disabilities is allowing them to go on the job and giving them work experience. I think one of the factors and one of the things that we should implement is that the first or second year that a student with disability enters into colleges, they should go into the work field of their particular interest to see how it is on the job, how to behave, how to act, what persons are looking for. (Conner, final interview, February 2, 2023)

Based on Conner's responses, it was interpreted that employment preparation and the provisions of work experience for students and/or graduates with disabilities should be the responsibility of the university. According to Conner, work experience should be provided for students with disabilities prior to graduating from tertiary education. Tamara, in response to the same question stated:

Make sure that you have some type of experience, even if it's not job experience. If you have some type of skill or knowledge that you've learned before that can be helpful to the type of job that you're seeking, you want to bring all that you have to the table so that you can see that you have this type of experience or you have something that can contribute to the type of job position that they're proposing. (Tamara, final interview, December 23, 2022)

Tamara's response was interpreted as the acquirement of experience being the responsibility of the individual. According to Tamara, it would benefit individuals to capitalize on their skills and experience that could be an asset to the job that they want. It was also interpreted that experience does not have to be limited to jobs but could also be knowledge-based or consist of skill-development. Fiona shared her experience with feeling unprepared due to having limited work experience. She stated:

I had gone through the classes to, you know, get my degree, but I still felt unprepared because I felt as if I lacked work experience or a lot of work experience as compared to other candidates coming out of university. A lot of employers say you need however many years of experience to get the job, but if no one gives you that opportunity, whether it's by volunteering or internships, how do you actually get that experience? (Fiona, initial interview, December 28, 2022)

Based on Fiona response, it was interpreted that employment opportunities and work experience are limited for persons with disabilities even in terms of internship or volunteer work. The importance of work

experience was interpreted as the exposure and resource needed to contribute to employment preparation in transition-age graduates with disabilities. For example, Conner and Fiona shared how in some respects they felt prepared, but not having adequate work experience made them unprepared and less likely to be recruited for employment.

Further, regarding job training/program/seminars, Conner clearly articulated that a training seminar on how to assist persons with disabilities on the job would be helpful. He stated:

Another program I think we should implement is having more training seminars for how to assist persons with disabilities on the job. Although disability has been improving in the Bahamas and everywhere around the world so far, I still believe there are more training and seminars that need to be done as it relates to assisting persons on the job who has a disability. (Conner, initial interview, January 20, 2023)

This response reflects a critical component to the overall vocational experience of persons with disabilities in the Bahamas. Introducing disability-related training seminars to employers may help them become comfortable with recruiting applicants with disabilities, learning more about their disabilities, and providing reasonable accommodations. Alexandra explained how training should be provided for students with disabilities, universities, and employers. She stated:

You are not gonna see plenty disabled people, but when you do, you kind of have to give people some sort of training. Like, you can't really translate this [training] to a job too well unless you make it a requirement. But at least for the university, you need to give some level of training and kind of allow the student to say, "okay, this is what you need to do every morning ahead of each lesson." So, you create habits for the student to use in their work in case that training is absent. But also, you train lecturers as well when they encounter a student, how to accommodate that student, be flexible and it becomes like clockwork. So, when they get another student, each new experience is a lot easier, you know, and they can give them better experiences so that in the workplace they could say, "okay, can I request this? This is what I've experienced, this is what I need." And they can have confidence because people underestimate negative experiences. (Alexandra, initial interview, December 29, 2022)

In this excerpt, Alexandra described how training for employment as a person with disabilities begins in the university setting. For instance, by teaching university students with disabilities to adopt a routine that encourages them to communicate their needs with professors, they would in turn be better prepared to do the same with employers. This practice in a

university setting would help to build students' confidence and improve self-advocacy skills. As a result of increased confidence and self-advocacy, students with disabilities would become more resilient to negative employment experiences they may come across. Additionally, according to Alexandra, lecturers could also benefit from ongoing training regarding learning how to accommodate students with disabilities. Lecturers' accommodation skills would improve the more they practice. Fiona further described how a job program should be introduced that would help employers with recruiting potential employees. She stated:

Potential employers should have a program in place where they just look across the Bahamas, they see the people that are coming out of college or university, and they see, okay, this person may be suited for this job or this particular job based on what I see on their resume, but they might not be there yet in terms of having the actual skills. (Fiona, initial interview, December 28, 2022)

Fiona also articulated that implementing seminars on work skills development for college/university graduates with disabilities would be helpful. She stated:

I think it would be helpful to hold various seminars about different skills that are needed in the workplace. For example, I see in a lot of job descriptions that I look at, I see they require Microsoft Excel or a PowerPoint on a lot of applications in the Microsoft office field. (Fiona, final interview, December 30, 2022)

According to Fiona, seminars designed for university students with disabilities and hosted by employers would help with building the most requested workplace skills. It was interpreted that employers should consider recruiting applicants based on qualifications and their potential, and provide the training needed for specific skill development rather than expecting applicants and recent graduates to present with all the skills listed as job requirements. This skill building provided by employers would improve employment outcomes for graduates with disabilities coming out of college/university and improve job performance for those actively employed.

Alexandra illustrated that in addition to career counseling being offered as a university-provided service, it should also be presented as a university course. Alexandra stated:

So, how to have career counseling? I feel as though, instead of having that as a service, perhaps put it as a class requirement to ensure that students utilize the service. I also think it starts in the classroom too, because if you get persons practicing and

having their needs met in the classroom, they can see what works for them and what doesn't for a work setting. (Alexandra, initial interview, December 29, 2022)

According to Alexandra, in a career counseling course, students with disabilities would learn more about their disability, their limitations, and their accommodation needs in a workplace setting. Access to this course would ensure students with disabilities are utilizing the career counseling service. Knowledge gained from a career counseling course would support a smooth transition from tertiary education to employment because students would have practiced the core components of transition in a controlled environment.

Disability-awareness

As mentioned, lack of disability inclusion was found to be a barrier to employment for the college/university graduates with disabilities of this study. In response to this barrier, participants voiced the need for more disability-awareness initiatives to achieve CIE. The participants of this study revealed that employers and human resource professionals in the Bahamas misunderstanding of persons with disabilities was associated with discriminatory behavior against college/university graduates with disabilities. This unreasonable perception towards applicants and employees with disabilities was largely based on unawareness regarding employer implicit biases and disability accessibility.

As described by one participant, addressing employer biases would be helpful in pursuing CIE. Tamara illustrated that employers should learn to address their biases when it comes to hiring persons with disabilities. She stated:

If you're really interested in giving people a chance, I guess learn more about biases, making sure that there isn't any, like don't be surprised if someone comes into your office for an interview and they're not who you're expecting. Don't judge them the way that you see them or the way that you think that they might be; because even persons with intellectual disabilities, they just may surprise you. (Tamara, initial interview, December 16, 2022)

Tamara's response exemplifies unconscious employer bias in hiring persons with disabilities. It was also interpreted that certain disabilities (e.g., intellectual and developmental disabilities) are more likely to be considered socially unacceptable compared to other categories of disabilities. Upon meeting applicants with disabilities, before getting to know them and their capabilities, employers may form an opinion on the applicants' competency based solely on first impressions. Tamara's response suggested that employers may reject an applicant with disabilities, specifically those with intellectual disabilities, who has the potential to be a valuable asset to a company.

Another participant described the importance of employers being aware of persons who use wheelchairs so that building and workspace accessibility would not be an issue. Natasha illustrated the importance of persons who use wheelchairs having ramps to access workplace facilities and sufficient office space to navigate. She stated:

You need at least a wheelchair ramp because in order to get in the office, you need a ramp. The ramp for the wheelchair basically made the whole office accommodating because the office to me is not accommodating in terms of persons using wheelchairs because they have the desk and the chairs so close to one another. (Natasha, initial interview, January 4, 2023)

According to Natasha, building and workspace accessibility is an essential factor for employers to incorporate for persons with disabilities pursuing employment. Wheelchair ramps, though considered a basic building accessibility feature, were initially lacking in her work environment but once introduced, made the entire office more accessible for persons who use a wheelchair. Additionally, with greater awareness of both visible and hidden disabilities, it was interpreted that an office space could be made safe and inclusive for all employees by creating clear pathways that are wide enough for wheelchair users to navigate through. One may be qualified for a job position, but if the building's entrance and office space is inaccessible for persons with disabilities, it creates a negative work experience that could impact one's job satisfaction and performance, as well as create an unsafe atmosphere for employees with and without disabilities. Simple adjustments to an office layout could enable employees with and without disabilities to fulfill their work duties safely and productively.

Discussion

The findings lend support to earlier research describing social support, self-determination, disability discrimination, the COVID-19 pandemic, VR Pre-employment Transition Service (Pre-ETS), and disability awareness programs. The experiences shared by the participants in this study illustrated ways in which their microsystem and self were valuable components to employment preparation. At the same time, the experiences also illustrated areas where strategies for disability- awareness, training, support, and inclusion in the workplace need to be further developed.

Social Support

The experiences of the present study's participants illustrate that positive social support is an important component for preparation in relation to achieving employment. Ji and colleagues (2019) described this social support process as the exchange of resources between the giver and the recipient to improve the welfare of the recipient. Fortunately, four out of five participants were able to achieve employment following social support from family,

friends, and peers. This correlates with Mazzotti and colleagues (2021) 23 predictors of post-secondary success, two of which include (a) parental expectations and (b) parent involvement. The experiences of these participants illustrate that parents are critical supports to transition-age youth and young adults with disabilities preparing to enter the workforce (Blustein et al., 2016). Blustein and colleagues (2016) stated that 80 percent of parents considered it somewhat or very important that their child obtain work in the first two years after graduation. Parent involvement was also found to be associated with improved postschool outcomes for youth with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2015; Papay & Bambara, 2014), including competitive employment (Wehman et al., 2015). Recognizing that parent expectations are strong predictors of employment for individuals with disabilities (Carter et al., 2012; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012), educational institutions and employment agencies in the Bahamas are encouraged to develop VR and employment strategies that incorporate families throughout the transition process.

The employment preparation experiences of this study's participants did not include their college/university campuses, community resources, or organizations. This lack of finding substantiates what BTVI (2022) and U.B. (2017) has to say about career services and placement. Both tertiary institutions describe career services available for students and alumni but fail to report its career plans for students with disabilities. Additionally, the Ministry of Social Services has the responsibility of providing services for Bahamians with disabilities but does not offer vocational support (Disability Affairs Division, 2016). Even further, the Bahamas' Department of Labour is responsible for spearheading employment trainings and programs for unemployed Bahamians but gives little attention to the unemployed disability population. By seeking to increase access and inclusion for Bahamian transition-age college/university graduates with disabilities in the employment sectors, college and university campuses, government Ministries (i.e. Social Services; Labour, Education; Youth, Sports and Culture), and organizations must become more formally supportive in better serving the disability community.

Self-Determination

Ward (1988) referred to self-determination as both “the attitudes which lead people to define goals for themselves and the ability to take the initiative to achieve these goals” (p. 2).

Engaging in self-determined motivation in relation to preparing for CIE was an important common experience shared by the participants. The act of self-determination was illustrated by participants through upskilling and keeping an updated resume. Self-determination enhanced participants' connection to their social support during the employment preparation process and improved their soft skills and ability to present these skills.

Self-determined motivation illustrated by participants correlates with Mazzotti and colleagues (2021) 23 predictors of post-secondary success, three of which include (a) career awareness, (b) self-determination/self-advocacy, and (c) youth autonomy/decision-making. Using VR or employment strategies that incorporate self-determination when preparing for CIE has the potential to increase post-tertiary education employment outcomes. Increased access to self-determination training programs on college/university campuses or within the community would help transition-age college/university graduates with disabilities to be better equipped to pursue opportunities for career development in the Bahamas.

Disability Discrimination

The responses from the participants related to inaccessibility and limited provisions of reasonable accommodations in the workplace were consistent with the literature on disability discrimination. Perry et al. (2000) found that university students with disabilities reported experiencing more access discrimination than individuals without disabilities. Respondents who experienced more discrimination reported lower levels of job satisfaction (Perry et al., 2000). Two participants, Fiona and Conner, with visible congenital disabilities shared experiences that illustrated the barriers to workplace access. Their experiences showed that the problems they experienced with accommodations were not associated with their requests or disclosure of having a disability, but rather with difficulties experienced with employers who were not open to, knowledgeable about, or experienced with providing disability support. Researchers found that individuals with visual impairments, wheelchair users, and individuals with limited motor control were more highly associated with access discrimination than other disability categories (Perry et al., 2000). Both Fiona and Conner fit the disability description detailed in the Perry and colleagues (2000) study and shared experiences that described higher levels of discrimination around inaccessibility, accommodations, and opportunity compared to the other participants. Fiona shared that she has been unemployed for five years since graduating from university in Spring 2019; and has had one job interview since then. Conner shared that although he is employed part-time, his job is “not the best.”

COVID-19 Pandemic

Growing financial insecurity is salient among people with disabilities and chronic health conditions due to the impact COVID-19 had on the labor market (Maroto et al., 2021). Negative employment outcomes during the pandemic would have an adverse impact on the mental and overall health and wellbeing of persons with disabilities. The correlation between employment and health is well-established in the literature (Hall et al., 2013). Yelin and Trupin (2003) reported that 54 percent of people with disabilities who

reported that they were in “excellent, very good, or good” health were employed compared to only 26 percent of those who reported they were in “fair or poor” health.

The impact employment or unemployment has on the mental health of persons with disabilities should receive more attention. Employment has been found to improve the mental health and wellbeing of people with serious mental health disorders, including improved self-esteem, symptom control, quality of life, social relationships, and community integration, without harmful side effects (Drake et al., 2013). Likewise, employment has been recognized as a health promotion intervention among special educators, VR counselors, and healthcare providers (Kaya et al., 2016).

Vocational Rehabilitation Pre-employment Transition Service

The findings on factors that would be helpful in the process of pursuing CIE in the Bahamas suggest the relevance and potential utility of the Pre-ETS approach provided by VR agencies in the United States of America. The beginning of the VR program can be traced to World War I (WWI) and evolved with the passage of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act Amendments which emphasized services to people with severe disabilities. More recently, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA; U.S. Department of Education, 2016) required states to reserve 15 percent of their federal VR program allotments to provide, or arrange for the provision of, Pre-ETS to students with disabilities in need of such services. Some required Pre-ETS included job exploration counseling for youth seeking to explore career options; counseling on opportunities for enrollment in PSE; work-based learning experiences such as in-school work opportunities or internships; workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living; and instruction in self-advocacy to be able to effectively communicate ones interests (Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center [WINTAC], 2016). The implementation of Pre-ETS represents a commitment to placing youth with disabilities on a pathway to successful careers (Sung et al., 2022). Similarly, the goals of VR have been identified as (a) inclusion, (b) opportunity, (c) independence (d) empowerment, (e) rehabilitation, and (f) quality life (Sung et al., 2022).

The literature describing the benefits that transition-age youth with disabilities received from having access to VR Pre-ETS is compelling. Rast and colleagues (2020) found that youth with autism spectrum disorder involved in Pre-ETS were more likely to exit VR with employment compared to those who did not receive training. Kaya and colleagues (2016) also found that transition-age youth with autism spectrum disorder who received on-the-job support, job placement services, rehabilitation technology, occupational/vocational training, other services, job search assistance, vocational counseling and guidance, and job readiness training from the state-federal VR program were significantly more likely to achieve competitive employment than

participants who did not receive those services. Receiving Pre-ETS and VR services significantly improves the odds of finding employment for youths with specific learning disabilities (Kaya et al., 2021).

Vocational rehabilitation programs or similarly focused programs are not available in the Bahamas. Participants voiced the need for services and resources that could help in the transition from tertiary education to CIE. Various components of what Pre-ETS represents were described by participants, including work experience, a job training, program, seminars, and career counseling.

Disability Awareness Programs

Pather and colleagues (2018) describe disability-awareness as providing necessary information about persons with disabilities in order to curb misunderstandings, which often creates barriers to social and environmental inclusion. Park and Kim (2018) found that disability-awareness educational programs reduce the overall prejudice against persons with disabilities while increasing positive attitudes towards people with disabilities. The barriers experienced by participants in response to research question two regarding inaccessibility and accommodation could be combatted or mitigated through the implementation of disability-awareness training programs. The types of implicit biases towards applicants and employees with disabilities described in the Bahamas is unacceptable and largely due to unawareness. Encouraging employers and coworkers to learn more about disability biases could help improve how they interact with applicants and employees with disabilities.

Recommendations

To address deficit societal beliefs and create a cultural shift in the Bahamian workforce, there is a need to interrogate the assumption that disability employment only consists of sheltered workshops or a job that provides little or no chance of career development and advancement. To address this assumption, it is recommended that the Bahamas implement a disability hiring quota policy in order to address disability-related inequalities in the labor market. Employment quotas would serve as a mandate to ensure all businesses, organizations, and companies hire at least a certain percentage of persons with disabilities, including those with targeted conditions such as intellectual and developmental disabilities. This policy tool would ensure persons with disabilities are represented in all aspects of the employment sectors in the Bahamas. Employers who are not in compliance with the disability employment quota would be required to pay a fine; or if the employer is governmental, funding would be withheld.

Limitations

This study is not intended to make generalizable claims about the nature of how this population prepares for employment, barriers experienced, and VR needs. In terms of sample size, the researcher was unable to provide information from a more expansive sample size due to the limited number

of persons meeting the criteria for this study. The small sample size was due to the small population of individuals with disabilities in the Bahamas who manage to obtain a degree in higher education. Another limitation was the researcher did not use a second reviewer to confirm the themes. There was no other researcher with the background needed, and the measures utilized were thorough.

Conclusion

This study was the first to document how Bahamian university graduates with disabilities experience job search and CIE in the Bahamas. This study yielded multiple examples of how the participants prepare for employment after graduating from university, barriers they experienced while navigating the employment sectors, and factors that would help in the process of achieving CIE out of university. A cultural shift is needed to improve employment outcomes for persons with disabilities in the Bahamas. Additional research is needed to document their experiences at the post-tertiary educational and vocational level.

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Ethics Declaration

This study was approved by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Minimal Risk Research Institutional Review Board and was determined to meet the criteria for exemption.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author, [SS]. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Competing Interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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Authors' Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript and preparation.

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