

Surveying Supported Employment in Finland: A Follow-up

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Abstract The longitudinal status of supported employment in Finland was examined via a 2003 nationwide survey sent to job coaches involved in supporting workers with intellectual and other disabilities. Sustained supported employment, defined as “paid work in integrated settings with ongoing supports that contained at least two on-site visits per month at the worksite” was identified at 22 organizations that supported 52 workers. The results of the current survey were compared with those gained from similar surveys conducted in 1998, 1999, and 2001. Comparison of data over a 6-year period showed a decline in the provision of intensive employment supports and appeared to reflect both a change in European public policy on employment supports, and a conceptual shift in supported employment from a paradigm for people with significant disabilities to a technical tool for the employment of people with limited support needs. Along with this change, supported employment agencies in Finland were found to have progressively barred people with significant disabilities from being their customers.

Keywords: disability policy, Finland, intellectual disabilities, supported employment

Supported employment was originally introduced as a form of a new service paradigm for people with significant intellectual and psychiatric disabilities in which services are conceived as individual supports helping the person to achieve his or her personal goals (Smull & Bellamy, 1991). When the old readiness thinking was superseded, there emerged the possibility for people with disabilities to enter directly into community life with the help of individual supports (Wehman, 1988). In supported employment, this goal was realized by providing employment support mainly through the use of job coaches in various phases of the employment process. For people with significant intellectual disabilities, the need for intensive support is ongoing, even if the fading of other supports to natural supports is thought to be an essential part of the process of community inclusion (Smull & Bellamy, 1991). The reported benefits of supported employment included higher earnings (Kregel, Wehman, & Banks, 1989), better cost-effectiveness (Cimera & Rusch, 1999), and various social and psychological assets for the participants (Griffin, Rosenberg, Cheyney, & Greenberg, 1996; Kober & Eggleton, 2005).

The early origins of supported employment can be seen in the transitional employment model of the Clubhouse movement of people with psychiatric problems. Transitional employment positions were often supported entry-level, part-time jobs that lasted

from 6 to 9 months (R. Pirttimaa, & T. Saloviita, Unpubl. data). This original form of supported employment was used in 1959 (Fountain House, 2006), but the extensive applications of supported employment are usually traced back to the mid-1980s in the United States where it was introduced as a way to assist people with severe intellectual disabilities in participating in authentic work (Wehman, 1988). The number of people in supported employment in the United States grew rapidly during the 1990s, reaching a level of over 150,000 in 1997 (Griffin, 1998). However, the number of people served in segregated, facility-based work programs continued to increase simultaneously, despite the expansion of supported employment (McGaughey, Kiernan, McNally, Gilmore, & Keith, 1995).

During the 1990s, supported employment began to awaken interest in many other countries, and its spread was enhanced through governmental funding. One important financial source in Europe was the Community Initiative Programs of the European Social Fund (ESF). The start of supported employment in Finland was associated with the joining of the country to the European Union (EU) in 1995. During the years 1996–97, funding from the ESF was used to start several pilot projects on supported employment for people with intellectual or mental disabilities. These pilot projects were coordinated by VATES, a foundation established for the promotion of employment for people with disabilities. Within VATES, the Finnish Network for Supported Employment (FINSE) was established to advance the policy of supported employment. Another resource for the development of supported employment was the funding offered by

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Finland's Slot Machine Association (RAY), an organization with a legal monopoly to function as a gaming operator. It has used its profits for various charitable purposes. RAY especially helped the Clubhouse movement with its transitional work model to become established in Finland. General political and economic background of the Finnish employment projects was described recently by O'Brien and Dempsey (2004).

The aim of this study was to survey the state of supported employment in Finland in the year 2003. We surveyed the number of people in supported employment as well as some of their characteristics and their terms of employment. The results were compared with our earlier findings from the years 1998, 1999, and 2001 (Pirttimaa & Saloviita, 2002; Saloviita & Pirttimaa, 2000).

METHOD

Participants

Since the beginning of supported employment in Finland in the year 1995, we have collected lists of programs possibly providing supported employment services. We obtained suggestions and addresses of such programs from the Ministry of Labor, from FINSE, from surveys, from newspapers and professional journals, and from other supported employment programs. Although, over the years, many programs announced that they had stopped providing supported employment, at the same time, new programs emerged. By January 2003, our list contained the names of 96 organizations as places with supported employment services.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection of previous follow-up studies was similar to this study and was reported elsewhere (Pirttimaa & Saloviita, 2002; Saloviita & Pirttimaa, 2000). For the current follow-up in January 2003, we mailed a questionnaire to the job coaches of the 96 organizations on our list. From the first mailing, we received answers from 41 agencies. Organizations that did not return the questionnaire by the deadline were contacted by telephone and asked to return their completed forms. This led to 52 additional replies. If the returned questionnaire was found to have missing data, we also telephoned the individual job coach and asked for a supplement. Only three agencies did not participate in the study. Thus, the return rate of our survey was 97%. Of the three abstaining agencies, two had no participants in supported employment. The third abstainer was an organization in a large city that had programs that probably served 10 to 20 people in supported employment. The officials of the city refused to participate in this study because they saw our definition of supported employment as too narrow and, therefore, leading to too low numbers of people employed. Even so, we estimated that our study succeeded very well in covering the field of supported employment in Finland, and the results, therefore, represent the real situation in the country.

In this study, we defined supported employment identically with our previous survey as paid work in integrated settings with ongoing support. Ongoing support was defined as face-to-face contact between the job coach, employee, and employer at least twice a month at the work site. As before, minimum wage or minimum working hours per week were not requested for a job to be classified as supported employment (Pirttimaa & Saloviita, 2002).

The questionnaire contained a few background questions concerning the organization itself. Separate forms were provided that were to be filled in by the job coaches for each person in supported employment on January 1, 2003. The form contained questions on personal data of people employed and their terms of employment. The data were analyzed with the SPSS 13.0 Statistical Package.

RESULTS

Supported Employment Agencies

Among the 93 responding organizations, 22 had workers in supported employment. In 1999, there were 21 such organizations and in 2001, there were 19 (Pirttimaa & Saloviita, 2002; Saloviita & Pirttimaa, 2000). Thus, the number of supported employment agencies remained at the same level during the entire follow-up period. However, many changes occurred. Only seven of the agencies identified in 2003 were active in supported employment in the year 2001, while 15 new agencies had emerged and 13 had retired from the field or did not answer our survey. The scale of activity was small. Of the organizations, 17 employed only one or two persons in supported work. The organization that employed the greatest number had 10 people in supported work. This was a clubhouse for people with psychiatric problems.

Organizations providing supported employment typically were sheltered workshops for people with intellectual disabilities ($n = 11$), clubhouses for people with psychiatric problems ($n = 6$), and associations ($n = 2$) and foundations or service centers ($n = 3$) founded for general employment purposes. Some kind of outside financial support for funding the supported employment activity of the organizations was available for 11 agencies. This support came from RAY in seven cases, from other sources in three cases, and from both RAY and the EU in one case.

Amount of People in Supported Employment

We found 52 persons in supported employment (under our definition). An additional 42 people were supported with face-to-face contact at least once a month. Personal data of the 52 people in supported work are presented in Table 1, which also contains corresponding results obtained in 1998, 1999, and 2001. The statistics from the two earlier years are not fully comparable because we used different criteria for ongoing support in 1998 and 1999.

TABLE 1
 Characteristics of people in supported employment in 1998, 1999, 2001, and 2003

Year	1998	1999	2001	2003
Frequency of support	1/month	4/month	2/month	2/month
Number employed	68	52	62	52
Mean age (years)	33	40	36	37
Proportion of women (%)	40	44	47	44
Type of disability (%)				
Intellectual disability	90	48	61	58
Mental illness	1	25	24	37
Physical or other	9	27	13	6
Primary education (%)				
Mainstream class	19	35	40	46
School for learning disabled	54	45	31	42
Training school	19	12	21	10
Other special	6	8	8	2
Vocational training (%)	48	69	69	75
In mainstream	—	26	30	40
In special education	—	74	70	60
Disability allowance (%)	100	73	74	73
Moved to employment from (%)				
Sheltered workshops		33	32	25
Other unpaid work	76	8	19	14
Paid work	—	8	3	4
Home	13	31	24	15
School	10	14	11	12
Other	—	8	10	30

In 1998, we counted only those cases in which individuals received support at least once a month, and in 1999, we counted only those who were contacted every week. In 2001 and 2003, we required that contact take place at least two times per month. However, we also counted those cases in which individuals received weekly or monthly support. Because no substantial differences were found among these groups in either year, we present data only from the group that received support at least twice a month.

We found that the number of people supported through on-site visits from the job coach at the workplace at least once a month increased from 68 (1998) to 87 (2001) to 94 (2003). The number of people supported at least twice a month decreased from 62 (2001) to 52 (2003) and the number of people supported at least once a week decreased from 52 (1999) to 28 (2001) to 27 (2003).

Terms of Employment

Terms of employment among people in supported employment for 2003 together with results from the previous survey years are presented in Table 2. People in transitional work orga-

nized by the clubhouses earned more per hour (€7.30) than did the workers supported by other agencies, but they had worked on the average only for about 5 months. The other workers earned less (€4.50) per hour, but had been working much longer (some 22 months) on the average.

DISCUSSION

The results of the follow-up survey showed that supported employment in Finland had settled down to a small scale activity since its beginning in 1995. The number of people employed had not exceeded 100. Specifically, the data indicated that ongoing support had been decreasing since the beginning of the initiative. These conclusions are based on a definition of supported employment as an activity that includes ongoing support by the job coach at least two times per month at the workplace.

The survey also showed that a clear change occurred in the worker group during the period from 2001 to 2003. The proportion of people with mental illness in supported employment increased from 1% in 1998 to 37% in 2003, while the proportion of people with intellectual disabilities decreased over the same time. This change reflected the spread of the clubhouse move-

TABLE 2

Terms of employment for people in supported work in 1998, 1999, 2001, and 2003

Year	1998	1999	2001	2003
Frequency of support	1/month	4/month	2/month	2/month
Number employed	68	52	62	52
Hourly wages in Euro (mean)	2.8	4.3	4.5	5.4
Monthly wages in Euro (mean)	249	372	374	418
Proportion at minimum wage (%)	13	44	43	48
Weekly working hours (mean)	25 h	21 h	21 h	20 h
Permanent work contract (%)	76	37	34	42
Months at current employment	—	11	13	16
Employer (%)				
Municipality or state	26	26	13	14
Societies and associations	74	20	13	21
Private business	—	51	74	65
Has own business	—	4	—	—
Work contract signed (%)				
1995	—	2	—	—
1996	—	6	—	—
1997	—	25	12	4
1998	—	37	3	2
1999	—	31	28	12
2000	—	—	33	6
2001	—	—	25	12
2002	—	—	—	58
2003	—	—	—	6

ment in Finland, with its transitional employment model while at the same time the funding from the ESF shifted from underwriting services to people with intellectual disabilities to other marginalized groups. This phenomenon explains the shifts in some variables evident in Tables 1 and 2. The changes in these variables, such as type of disability, education, vocational training, and disability allowance, reflect the shift in the customer groups from those persons with severe cognitive disabilities to more mainstream users of employment services.

Another reason for the withering of supported employment after its decrease in funding had to do with agency policies. The foundational philosophy of supported employment with its "zero-reject" principle fit poorly into the basic beliefs of those organizations that were mobilized to promote supported employment (Saloviita, 2000). Our 2003 survey indicated that only 19% of the job coaches in the intellectual disability field were willing to provide employment support to all the workers who wanted it. This unwillingness was mainly motivated by the lack of work skills of the workers (Pirttimaa & Saloviita, 2004). On a public policy level, there emerged no official policy inside the organizations striving for inclusion of supported employment, neither did there emerge any public funding especially allocated to supported employment. Thus, supported employment was left to the private enthusiasm of those very few job coaches who saw it as meaning-

ful. As a result, the typical number of people employed in supported work was only one or two workers per employment organization. It was also understandable if the enthusiasm of the job coaches faded away with the passing of time from their initial training.

In addition, as evident in Table 2, work contracts in supported employment did not last a very long time. The increase of transitional employment placements can be seen in the decrease of permanent work contracts. People in transitional work typically return to their previous lives after the work experience. Our previous study showed that permanent employment was rare (R. Pirttimaa, & T. Saloviita, Unpubl. data). Furthermore, there was an observable change in the employer organizations with an indication of a slight decrease in public employers and an increase in private business (Table 2). Based on our own observations during the early years of supported employment, this finding can be understood by the lack of initial experience, for at first job coaches felt more comfortable in seeking jobs mainly from their own municipal organizations.

A Change in the Concept

Finnish experiences demonstrate a change in the concept of supported employment. Originally launched as a zero-reject

policy for the employment of people with significant disabilities (Wehman, 1988), the concept has come to mean the use of job coaches in the employment of various groups of marginalized people. This means the dropping of the requirement of intensive ongoing support from the definition. The information booklet of the European Union of Supported Employment (2006) illustrates this in the way it is formatted. On one side, the booklet uses the original rhetoric according to which supported employment assists people with significant disabilities with appropriate ongoing support and guarantees that services are fully accessible to all people with disabilities. On the other side, it is understood that “due to funding and other operational restrictions, service providers are often forced to focus on a more limiting approach than the full model of supported employment” (European Union of Supported Employment, 2006). Our point is that this “more limiting approach” has become the main form of supported employment, at least in European countries (Pirttimaa & Saloviita, 2002). In Finland, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health published a survey that counted between 250 and 260 people in “supported employment” (Ylipaavalniemi, 2001). However, supported employment was defined as the use of a job coach in employment without any prerequisite of ongoing support. In this study, the proportion of people with intellectual disabilities was 43% and was predicted to be decreasing. Similarly in Norway, the proportion of people with intellectual disabilities in supported employment was decreasing and was no more than 12% in 2003 (Spjelkavik, Frøyland, & Evans, 2004).

Seemingly, the idea of using job coaches and direct support at the workplace has been received by employment authorities as a new method to help employ members of some marginalized groups. These ideas are often referred to as a “method” of supported employment. This expression converts the idea of supported employment from a new paradigm to a mere technical tool (Saloviita, 2000). In this process, people with significant intellectual disabilities have found themselves barred once more. For them, sheltered workshops and day care centers still remain the main choice unless inclusive policies in accord with the United Nations disability programs (United Nations, 1993) gain more political traction. The number of people with intellectual disabilities who possibly would be interested in supported employment can be estimated on the basis of the number of people currently in sheltered workshops (around 6,000 people in Finland; Ylipaavalniemi, 2001). The total number of people in 350 sheltered workshops for people with disabilities was 11,000 (Ylipaavalniemi & Varanka, 2002). Thus, the potential field for supported employment in Finland is large even if not all people in sheltered environments do need intensive supports. Perhaps the real problem in the difficult spread of supported employment and its conceptual distortion lies in the fact that the concept has been mainly accepted by employment authorities who are interested only in those people who are not receiving disability pensions. However, supported employment has much to give, especially to people with severe cognitive disabilities (Wehman, 1988).

Accordingly, there remains a need to awaken the interest of social and health authorities.

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