

## Personal Perspectives: Changing the Question

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“Do you want to get a job someday?” This would have been a rather peculiar question to ask me as I was completing my bachelor’s degree in special education at a small, public northeastern university several years ago. Had someone actually asked me this question, I likely would have responded affirmatively, perhaps accompanied by a tone of sarcasm. I had completed challenging entrance examinations, spent thousands of dollars on tuition (thanks, Mom and Dad!), and dedicated four years to studying. Of course I wanted to get a job!

Ironically, I found myself asking this exact question to a group of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities during my first year of teaching in a community-based transition program classroom. Our program includes instruction in, among many other things, employment readiness skills. More often than not students would respond “Yes, Mr. L.”. This would then open the door to a conversation involving career preferences, the job application process, and dream jobs. It was a natural response. My students were experiencing a similar process as the one I went through. But one important variable was different: the presence of a disability.

One of my best friends whom I met in college has a younger brother who happens to have Down syndrome. “Noah” is a bright young man, full of ambition and with an affinity toward physical fitness. Transition assessments correctly indicated he would thrive

in a gym or recreational setting working around people. Despite these assessment findings, Noah’s first work assignment through his school’s transition program was to clean tables in a hospital cafeteria. Unfortunately, this included little to no interaction with others. A few weeks into the placement, his job coach visited the site to assess his progress. To her chagrin, the tables in the dining space were not only dirty, but Noah had refused to complete the task and was sitting on the floor with his arms crossed in disgust. It was clear Noah was not exactly set up for success.

All individuals possess value, despite any differences. I appreciate the concept of people-first language in that it encourages us to look at the individual from a holistic view, where disability is just one part of a whole. Historically, people with disabilities have been devalued and grouped by diagnosis instead of by strengths and contributions. Unfortunately, look where that got us (e.g., institutions, Noah’s experience). As teachers, family members, friends, and neighbors, we cannot be satisfied with prevailing assumptions that individuals with significant disabilities cannot find and maintain meaningful employment. Instead of going through the motions and placing students in vocational experiences based on their label, IQ scores, or what is “convenient,” we should take the time to learn about their strengths as well as their quirks. More than anything, we should take the time to listen.

Noah’s teachers eventually listened and his next internship was at a fitness center. Noah impressed his employers so much that upon graduating from the program he went on to gain paid employment at a gym in his neighborhood. Five years later, Noah continues to work at the same gym and was recently promoted to assistant personal trainer. Instead of asking our friends with disabilities, “Do you want to get a job someday?”, perhaps we should ask, “How can we help you get the job *you want* someday?”.