
Youth Employment through Accessible and Healthy communities in Canada (YEAH Canada!)

Final Research Report

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By the Childhood Disability Collaborative, McGill University

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1. Introduction

Children and youth with disabilities and their families are systematically marginalized and vulnerable to exclusion from many aspects of daily life (1). The rights of children with disabilities are protected in Canada by the UN CRPD (2) and UN CRC (3) ; however, policies, programs, standards, and regulations often fail to prioritize the needs of this group.

The lack of coordinated action towards children and youth with disabilities at the federal level in Canada has been brought to attention in the last UN Concluding Observations (COs) to the CRPD report (4). The COs highlighted that the lack of data being collected on children with disabilities in Canada is alarming, the lack of accountability of essential services that are provincially offered is concerning, and the neglect of services and adequate provisions for first nations and indigenous children is unacceptable.

The Social Model of Disability and the Social Determinants of Health Framework show that poor outcomes in life such as lack of employment can be a result of poor social structures and persisting systemic barriers that perpetuate marginalization (5). Youth with disabilities face obstacles to inclusion in multiple community settings across their life span. Exclusions experienced in the early years are often perpetuated through education and consequently impacting employment opportunities. Groups facing intersectional barriers, such as youth with multiple disabilities, autistic youth, and Indigenous youth with disabilities may face greater exclusion in many of community settings (6).

The transition from school to post-school employment can be particularly challenging for youth with disabilities (7-9). In 2019, Canadian youth with disabilities ages 15 to 24 had an employment rate of 55%. The rate dropped to 39% in July 2020, following the pandemic (10), attesting to the vulnerability of youth with disabilities in relation to community and contextual changes.

To address this issue, this project identified research evidence and current programs in Canada that can support the identification of inclusive pathways leading to the employment of youth with disabilities. We also identified barriers for groups that are in the intersection of identities and socio-demographic factors that may contribute to added exclusion such as indigenous youth with disabilities, girls and gender diverse youth, and youth living in non-urban communities.

This research project was done in close collaboration and partnership with Civil Society Organizations who participated in all aspects of research development, including defining and refining the research questions, supporting identification of sites and programs for community evaluation, identification and recruitment of participants for key informant interviews, and collaborative analysis of data.

By aligning the best practice evidence, assessing the communities themselves and listening to youth we can inform the creation of standards that consider the specific needs and evolving capacities of youth with disabilities in attaining and maintaining employment, and communities to be more inclusive and supportive for youth with all disabilities.

Ethics approval for all aspects of this project was obtained through the McGill University Institutional Ethics Review Board.

Study Objectives:

- (1) To identify best practices for school-to-work transitions (e.g., programs, policies, standards) that can support access of youth with disabilities into employment.
- (2) To assess the factors in the communities (policies, services, and programs) that support or hinder youth with disabilities pathways to employment.
- (3) To identify pathways for the development of standards that consider the specific needs and evolving capacities of youth with disabilities.

For this purpose, the project was structured in three phases. Phase 1 involved environmental scans at the federal and national levels, a program review to identify best practices in employment and youth transition programs, a realist review of research done in youth employment programs, and a community assessment of selected best practice programs in Canada. Phase 2 consisted of key informant interviews, while Phase 3 focused on knowledge mobilization strategies.

2. Environmental scans

2.1. Environmental scan of youth employment programs at the national level

2.1.1. Methods

The Canadian Coalition for Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) Research Team conducted two environmental scans between June- December 2024.

Inclusion criteria: Employment programs (including in rehabilitation, school, and work/community environments) primarily targeting youth with all disabilities, between the ages of 14-30 years old (following the World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on expanding considerations for youth until 30 years old) at national (Federal programs in Canada). Types of disabilities: All different types of disabilities (E.g., Intellectual, Physical, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Visual, Deaf or Hard-of-hearing, Behavioral, Mental health conditions).

Search strategy: Different ministries' websites, especially Ministry of Employment and Ministry of Education, Open Government Portal and the CANLLI search database were searched to scan for programs, policies, and services in Canada, followed by searches in provincial and territorial governmental portals. International search for programs were done using a snowballing approach from known international partners of CCRW.

The research team developed a data extraction sheet to retrieve relevant information from the programs and best practice recommendations. We conducted a content analysis with the information extracted to identify key characteristics of programs and services related to employment of youth with disabilities in Canada and internationally. This comprehensive review included non-scientific publications about programs, services, guidelines related to employment of youth with disabilities.

2.1.2. Results

A total of 36 programs and policies were initially identified. After the screening process, 26 were excluded based on specific criteria. Exclusions included cases where the jurisdiction was not federal (n=15) or where the jurisdiction was not federal and targeted adults (n=2). Additional reasons for exclusion were as follows: not meeting the definition of a policy, program, or initiative (n=2), not specific to youth with disabilities (n=2), not specific to youth (n=1), focused solely on education rather than employment (n=1), falling outside the specified date range and not being a program or policy (n=1), incomplete information (n=1), and being categorized as a research report (n=1).

Overview of included jurisdictions

Among the included jurisdictions (n=10), most were categorized as programs (n=8), while a smaller number (n=2) were classified as policies or policy development initiatives. The programs encompassed initiatives like Youth the Future, SEARCH, Autism CanTech!, and the Youth Employment Program, all of which aimed at providing targeted interventions, skills training, and support for both youth with disabilities and potential employers. Additionally, policies and policy development efforts, such as the Enabling Accessibility Fund (EAF) and the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS), facilitated funding and implementation for various projects promoting inclusivity, particularly in the realm of employment.

Providers included a mix of federal government departments (e.g., Employment and Social Development Canada) and agencies (e.g., National Research Council Canada), regional and national organizations (e.g. Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work), collaborative partnerships with private foundations (e.g., RBC Foundation), and post-secondary institutions.

The programs and policies retrieved addressed various disability types. While most were inclusive of all disabilities, some did not specify a particular focus. One program was specifically tailored for youth with developmental or intellectual disabilities (SEARCH), while another program focused on individuals on the autism spectrum (Autism CanTech!).

In terms of age criteria, most programs (6 out of 10) served youth aged 15-30, with one targeting 18-30 and another 15-29. One program lacked clear age criteria, with one requiring only the minimum working age.

Key Themes and Objectives in Identified Programs and Policies

An analysis of the retrieved programs and policies indicates a predominant focus on skills training and job readiness (n=7), mentoring and coaching (featured in five programs), and work placements or paid work experience (offered by seven programs). Additionally, employer support measures—encompassing training, mentorship, and financial assistance—are incorporated into six programs, while employment services are identified in three. Networking opportunities appear in three programs. Conversely, elements such as policy development, school-to-work transitions, and volunteering are less frequently addressed.

2.2. Environmental scan of international employment programs

2.2.1. Methods

In Phase 2, the YEAH project sought to investigate what programs and services exist in the international context within selected countries and jurisdictions. Phase 2 was conducted from October to December 2024.

For Phase 2, the Principal Investigator's research team at McGill used AI to generate a list of countries with specific employment initiatives, programs, and legislative measures targeting or including provisions for

youth with disabilities. Upon discussion with the project advisory committee, they identified priority countries and followed the recommendations of the advisory members to identify countries who had been awardees from the Zero project, considering that the Zero project is a global scale, long-term initiative focusing on disability from a Human Rights perspective, which aligns with the YEAH project framework. Next, their team considered the list of Zero Project awardees that would allow for a purposefully geographical representation from five continents.

The last criteria was based on the characteristics of the countries, and expertise in the team to review documents in languages other than English and French (e.g. Brazil). The selected sample of countries, and the rationale provided by the PI's team, is outlined below:

1. The USA
 - a. Rationale:
 - i. Proximity
 - ii. Awards (9 from the zero project)
 - iii. Has both programs and legislation on the employment of youth with disabilities.
2. European Union
 - a. Rationale:
 - i. Comprises multiple countries with broad geographic representation, including some nations, such as Spain and Austria, that are recognized for best practices and have received top awards.
 - b. Only programs/policies valid for the entire EU, not individual countries, were considered.
3. Inde
 - a. Rationale:
 - i. Features 2 programs specific to youth employment
 - ii. Incorporates Asian regional perspective
 - iii. Among those nations with the highest number of Zero Project awards
4. Japan
 - a. Rationale:
 - i. Has Vocational Rehabilitation Centers for Persons with Disabilities, established in the 1960s, with ongoing updates. These centers offer specialized support for young people with disabilities to help them find and maintain employment.
 - ii. Japan also has 3 awards from the Zero Project also has 3 awards from the Zero Project.
5. Australia
 - a. Rationale:
 - i. Similarity in governance structure with Canada
 - ii. Top awarded on Zero Project.
6. Brasil
 - a. Rationale:
 - i. Perspective from Latin America
 - ii. Has 3 Zero project awards
 - iii. Possède des dimensions continentales similaires à celles du Canada
 - iv. PI team capacity to analyze documents in Portuguese; materials were forwarded to the team at McGill.

7. Afrique du Sud

a. Rationale:

- i. Introduced the "National Youth Development Strategy on Youth with Disabilities" in 2022, offering a unique perspective from the continent of Africa

Search Strategy: CCRW's research team reviewed non-scientific (grey literature) publications related to employment of youth with disabilities, including publications about programs, services, and guidelines. Topics of publications could include school to work transition programs and services; skills training; employment; career development; or other topics related to youth employment.

We used multiple search strategies, including (a) Google searches and searches through Google's Custom Search Engine, (b) web searches facilitated by Microsoft Copilot, (c) database searches of Google Scholar, (d) a Novanet catalogue search, and (e) snowball searches (reference chaining) from our initial AI and Google web searches. Snowball searching or reference chaining involves identifying related resources through the works referenced in a report or resource. Another approach to Google searches was identifying disability-related organizations and searching their websites for youth-specific programming: for example, [Women with Disabilities Australia](#) and [Physical Disability Australia](#).

Search Terms: AI and Google searches used key phrases including, but not limited to, 'youth with disabilities,' 'policies, programs, or initiatives,' 'community organizations,' 'transitioning into the workforce,' 'school to work transition,' and the jurisdiction of focus (e.g., Canada, United States).

Due to the conversational nature of AI web search tools, we were able to use searches like 'What are ten national programs or initiatives in South Africa that support youth with disabilities in the school to work transition?' and 'What national programs, policies, or initiatives exist in the United States that support youth with disabilities transitioning into the workforce?' AI searches typically required snowball searching to identify relevant resources.

Inclusion Criteria: Our environmental scan focused on policies, programs, services, and guidelines related to the employment of youth with disabilities. Items were excluded if (a) they were not specific to youth (up to 31 years old), (b) they were not exclusively supporting youth with disabilities (i.e. if they targeted all youth), (c) they did not apply to the jurisdictions in question (Canada, United States of America, European Union, India, Japan, Australia, Brazil, or South Africa), or (d) they were outside of the date range of interest (i.e. if they concluded before 2008).

To distinguish between policies and legislation, items were determined to be "policies" if they were governmental instruments put in place to a) provide funding for certain purposes (expenditure), b) encourage or penalize certain actions (regulation), or c) indicate the activity will be government-run (public ownership). Items were categorized as laws if they were acts or standards.

Data Extraction: Three CCRW research team staff independently searched for items to include in the environmental scan, extracting data according to the protocol developed by the research team at McGill University.

The CCRW research team developed a data extraction template for the scans. The research team recorded the following information:

- Confirmation of inclusion criteria
- Reason for exclusion, if applicable
- Program/Service Title
- Type (e.g., program, service, policy)
- Objective of the program/service
- Level (i.e. Supranational, national, regional)

- Location (name of country/jurisdiction)
- Provider (e.g., federal government ministry, national organization)
- Duration (e.g., ongoing, years active)
- Language (e.g., English, French, Portuguese)
- Age range (i.e. ages served)
- Disability types (i.e. disability types served)
- Format (e.g., government repository, webpage, report)
- Year (i.e. year report/record was published, if available)
- Authors (if applicable)
- Title (if applicable, title of webpage/document)
- URL (i.e. URL to access record of program)

2.2.2 Results

Overview of identified programs and legislations

A total of 104 resources were initially identified, of which only 40 met the criteria for inclusion in the analysis. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of resources identified across selected jurisdictions and the subset that met the inclusion criteria.

The United States had the highest number of identified resources (n=29), with 16 meeting the inclusion criteria. Notably, this includes one joint initiative shared with Japan. The European Union accounted for 13 resources, with 2 meeting the criteria. India and South Africa had 15 and 17 resources identified, respectively, with 4 and 6 included in the analysis. Japan contributed 4 resources, all of which met the inclusion criteria, including the joint initiative with the United States. Australia identified 13 resources, with 4 included and Brazil had 14 resources identified, with 5 qualifying for inclusion.

Table 1: Number of resources identified, by jurisdiction:

	Identified	Met inclusion criteria
All jurisdictions	104	40
USA	29*	16*
EU	13	2
India	15	4
Japan	4*	4*
Australia	13	4
Brazil	14	5
South Africa	17	6

**includes 1 joint initiative between Japan and USA*

The majority of programs and services either included all disability types or did not specify a particular focus. However, some programs targeted specific disability types, including sensory disabilities (e.g., visual and hearing impairments), invisible disabilities, and permanent disabilities.

The programs and initiatives represented a wide range of age groups. Most specified lower age limits starting at 14, 15, 16, or 18, with upper limits varying between 16 and 35. Some initiatives were not defined by specific age ranges but instead focused on target groups such as secondary or postsecondary students and recent graduates.

Description of the program objectives by country

USA: The USA had the largest number of interventions (n = 15), including two policies, one initiative, one strategy (the 2020 federal youth plan), and eleven programs/services.

Funding policies and initiatives included the PROMISE Initiative, which identified and implemented interventions aimed at improving education and employment outcomes for youth receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and their families including a paid work experience prior to leaving high school, benefits planning and financial capability, and parent information and training. (Additionally, the Equitable Transition Model Demonstration Grants provided federal funding to support the development of evidence-based solutions that enhance training and employment opportunities for disabled youth and young adults. The Disability Employment Initiative funds efforts to expand effective workforce strategies and improve inclusive services, including making American Job Centers more accessible, training staff, and boosting cross-system collaboration to support employment for people with disabilities.

The 2020 Federal Youth Transition Plan aims to improve agency coordination to help youth access key supports—like healthcare, work experiences, and community resources—to build independence, career readiness, and overall well-being.

Programs and services were mainly focused on work placements / paid work experience or internships (n=6), coaching or mentoring (n=5), skills training (n=4) and school to work transition (n=4). Other supports included coordinated case management, mental health counseling, rehabilitation services, secure housing assistance, and transportation solutions (Disability Innovation Fund), leadership skills development (Youth Leadership Camp), disability advocacy classes and virtual community events (AAPD Internship programs), youth empowerment, access to social and health services, and benefits counseling (YTD program), as well as policy change support and technical assistance for states (Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program).

Japan: Three programs were identified in Japan, primarily targeting students. In two of these programs, the corporate sector served as the provider, with key components including skills training and internships focused on IT and business skills. The third program, DO-IT Japan, was a collaboration between academia and industry. It aimed to support students and youth with disabilities in transitioning to post-secondary education and employment through technology. This program offered tailored learning, skills training, internships, and additional support, such as community participation. Finally, the U.S. and Japan collaborated on the TOMODACHI Initiative, a public-private partnership designed to cultivate leadership and entrepreneurial skills for college students.

EU: At the supranational level in Europe, two key initiatives met the inclusion criteria. The ALMA initiative, led by the European Commission, aims to support disadvantaged young people aged 18 to 29 who are not in employment, education, or training (NEETs), by facilitating their entry into work or training to promote social inclusion. The Make it Work! project also provided targeted support, offering employment information in sign language and accessible written formats for deaf youth seeking jobs.

Australia: In the Australian context, four programs were identified, all of which included a work experience component. Some combined this with skills training and apprenticeships to support students transitioning from school to work — for example the *Transition to Work* and *SLES* programs. Others, such as the *Prepare-Trial-Hire* program, addressed both employability training for youth and provided financial support to businesses offering internships, with government-covered insurance.

India: Four programs focused on skills training and job placements, all led by the Youth4Jobs Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing placement-linked skill development for youth with disabilities. Additional support included various initiatives such as motivational sessions, mock interviews, personality development, and exposure visits (Samarthanam Skilling programs), post-placement assistance (WISE program), and efforts to raise awareness among companies about the capabilities of youth with visual impairments (VI Connect program).

South Africa: One program identified, *Vava iYouth*, focuses on supporting youth with disabilities through the provision of assistive devices, promoting their inclusion and self-representation in various forums, and offering training and internships to enhance skills and improve employment prospects. SADYDP, a national organization in South Africa, provides youth development programs that support Deaf youth in advocating for their human rights through local initiatives. Its offerings include (pre-)employment components such as skills training and small business development. However, specific details about these programs are not available online.

3. Realist review

The following text are segments extracted from the published realist review by Hagelstam-Renshaw et al. The full article is available and can be cited as: Hagelstam-Renshaw, A., Cardoso, R., Zeidan, J., Mahmoudi, E., Nguyen, L., Philippopoulos, E., & Shikako, K. (2026). Mapping community pathways to employment for youth with disabilities—a realist review. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 14, 1743478.

3.1. Realist Review Objectives

A realist review was conducted to identify the context, mechanisms and outcomes described in peer-reviewed research literature on community programs that support employment for youth with disabilities. This review aimed: (a) to identify the community-based factors related to the employment of youth ages 15–25 with all types of disabilities, and (b) describe the contexts and mechanisms within employment readiness programs that contribute to successful school-to-work employment outcomes.

3.2. Methods

We followed the RAMESES standards, and ran searches on Medline, PsycINFO, ERIC, Policy Commons, Sociological Index, Google Scholar, REHABData and Canadian Research Index. Search terms were related to employment, disabilities, youth, and community factors. After an initial review of 10,682 titles, we refined the scope of research to employment programs as opposed to the initial broader scope of school-to-work transition literature, for feasibility purposes and to maintain the Context-Mechanism-Outcome (C-M-O) structure clearer. Initially, 1,157 articles met the inclusion criteria and were screened for full text, after which 56 articles were retained for data extraction and analysis.

Our review is theoretically grounded in two key frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (11) and Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) Framework (12). This dual-framework approach was chosen to build a comprehensive initial program theory that accounts for both the multi-layered environmental influences on youth development and the overlapping systems of discrimination that create unique

experiences for youth when transitioning across systems of care and social structures. Intersectionality theory guides the understanding that the pathways toward employment are impacted by Bronfenbrenner's micro factors operationalized through individual identities: women, men, and gender-diverse groups, and the “plus” in the GBA+ tool including identity factors such as race, age, and disability. Based on principles of substantive equality, we aimed at understanding how youth employment programs address the different identities of youth and how communities consider or neglect youth's intersectional identities as they navigate through the macro and exosystems leading to employment.

The Child Community Health Inclusion Index (CHILD-CHII) Macro-Level factors were used as a framework for data extraction and analysis, including transportation, staff training, community design, awareness initiatives, healthcare access, general programs/services, volunteer/work, education, technology, web-mapping, accessibility policies, and social factors. Data was grouped into context, mechanisms, and outcomes to provide an overview of what programs exist, in what circumstances and what type of outcomes are considered successful employment in the existing research.

3.3. Results

Most factors identified related to the meso environment, particularly general programs and services ($n = 38$), education ($n = 25$) and social aspects ($n = 14$). The research identified presented programs acting mostly on micro and mesosystems, such as offering opportunities for social gatherings and mentorship paired with job placements as well as specific skills training. Many programs were held within school settings and hospitals, but studies presented limited exploration of how the exosystems such as policies and funding contributed to the implementation, development and configuration of youth employment programs. The realist analytical process led to defining “Contexts”, in this review as the settings (e.g., education, health) or places (e.g., country, region) where programs took place. “Mechanisms” were strategies such as interventions, policies, incentives implemented to facilitate employment of youth with disabilities, and “Outcomes” were all the direct and indirect results described in the studies that related to employment. The analysis of intersectionality suffused the interpretation of how individual attributes act in the microsystems and influence the experiences of youth, the availability of programs, and expected outcomes. However limited information about the GBA+ factors limited the depth of this analysis, reducing the generalizability of our findings, and pointing to an important gap in the research literature. A critical analysis of the limited consideration for intersectionality is granted.

A critical analysis of the evidence reveals that program success is not universal. Several studies reported negative, null, or inconsistent outcomes, or did not measure or structure outcomes beyond the micro and mesosystems, limiting a comprehension of the outcomes at the exo and macrosystems. A recurring pattern was the failure of skills learned in protected settings to transfer to real-world environments. Several studies highlighted failures at the meso-system level. This points to a failure of coordination between educational, health, and employment systems, where a lack of continuity in support (Context) undermines the individual gains made by youth (Outcome).

The review also identified findings that challenge simple causal assumptions. While some studies found disability severity to be a barrier (13), others reported no significant relationship between impairment level and employment success (14). These inconsistencies suggest that the influence of such factors is highly context-dependent and mediated by other variables, such as the availability of alternative supports (e.g., remote work options, specialized job coaching) that were not always measured in the included studies.

3.4. Discussion

Overview of identified programs and legislations

A major finding of this review is the overwhelming focus of existing research on individual-level mechanisms. The most frequently identified program components (e.g. skills training, job preparedness, and mentorship) are all aimed at changing the individual youth. While important, this focus inadvertently places the onus of adaptation on the person with a disability, rather than on the systems and environments that create barriers. Our analysis shows that the evidence base is largely silent on interventions aimed at tackling structural, political, and macro-level influences. This individual-level bias is likely a product of the institutional contexts in which most research is conducted (i.e., education and healthcare), which are inherently focused on individual service provision. However, it results in a critical blind spot. The review uncovered evidence of programs failing not because of deficits in the youth, but because of systemic failures, such as the abrupt cessation of supports (36) or workplaces that were unaccommodating (38). These findings support the argument that without addressing the broader systemic determinants of employment such as inflexible workplace structures, discriminatory hiring practices, inadequate social protection policies, and inaccessible transportation, the impact of individual-level interventions will always be limited.

4. Community Assessments

4.1. Background: The Child Community Health and Inclusion Index

The Child Community Health and Inclusion Index (CHILD-CHII) is a comprehensive measurement tool developed through a rigorous consensus process and based on indicators at international level. It is used to examine elements within a given community that promotes healthy living and inclusivity for youth with disabilities (15). Designed to be used by different interest holders within their communities, the tool addresses key contextual considerations within four sectors: Education (e.g., schools, education institutions), Health (e.g., hospitals, rehabilitation centers), Public Spaces (e.g., parks, playgrounds, splash pads), and Community Institutions/Organizations (e.g., community centers, libraries). It captures indicators that provide an overview of community inclusivity, including programs, physical structure of the facility, and broader community aspects, thus providing insight on areas that could be improved to create a more inclusive community (15).

The CHILD-CHII consists of three main assessments including the Macro Community-At-Large Assessment, the Organizational Assessment and the On-site Assessment. The On-site Assessment contains elements pertaining to the physical location where the activity is held (e.g. accessibility of bathrooms, width of doorways), the Organizational Assessment includes elements related to the administration of the activity (e.g. availability of alternative and inclusive formats to deliver instructional material, training of staff), and the Macro Community-At-Large Assessment (or Macro-Level Assessment), includes elements related to the surrounding area where the activity is held (e.g. adapted transportation available within the neighborhood, policies supporting inclusion, staff training).

4.2. Methods

Building on the findings of the realist review, and its emphasis on the ways in which community contexts shape program services, delivery, and participant enrollment, our team established contact with communities across Canada presently offering employment programs. The CHILD-CHII was applied to

program sites within these communities to gain a more in-depth understanding of the community factors present in selected employment programs considered best practices across Canada.

The results will be analyzed with consideration of the geographical location of the communities where employment programs are offered, and the characteristics of the populations that participate in the programs.

We adopted a purposeful sampling and maximum representation strategy for the community assessments and sites, which were chosen in collaboration with the research and advisory teams to meet the following purposeful sampling criteria: programs that were known best practice programs in youth employment, offered in different sectors (community, health, education), across different provinces, preferably publicly funded, and preferably serving different groups of youth in terms of disabilities profiles, or programs serving youth with any disability.

Each site was assessed independently by two assessors, to ascertain inter-rater reliability in the application of the CHILD-CHII. The assessors applied the Macro and Organizational sections of the CHILD-CHII to the site where the program is offered, and the program itself. The assessments were conducted in person or virtually using video images, and through interviews with program managers and information available online on the program and site. Assessments were conducted between June – December 2025.

We also aimed to initially assess programs serving specifically indigenous youth with disabilities; however, the time constraints and accessibility and timing of the project did not align with the current priorities of indigenous communities that we reached out through our collaborators. This limitation will be described in the limitations section of this report.

The programs selected were a national and internationally developed employment program offered by a Rehabilitation center in Ontario, a community-based program offered by a Foundation in Alberta, and a School-based program in Quebec. The results of each assessment are described below.

4.3. Child Community Health Inclusion Index Site assessments

4.3.1. Site 1: Pediatric rehabilitation center in metropolitan area

We conducted the CHILD-CHII in a large pediatric rehabilitation center located in a large metropolitan area in Ontario, offering different services for youth and their families. The center is a reference service in different areas and runs an internationally-recognized youth employment program(16). The center was awarded Top Employers for Young People Award in 2025 for offering best workplaces and program for youth with disabilities. The hospital runs youth employment participation programs. The centre is also the coordinator of the national community of practice for all project sites across Canada (17). Within the parameters of the research conducted in this thesis, the center was the first site where the CHILD-CHII Assessment was performed. The hospital itself is located in the Toronto Region, a densely populated city in Ontario with a population density of 4427.8 people per square kilometre in 2021 (18), and connects multiple neighborhoods with its placement. Accordingly, the hospital provides services to an array of different communities with the goal of supporting youth with childhood onset disability, injury and developmental diversity in clinical aid, rehabilitation, and research (19). Since its inception in 1996 (20) , and with over 800 sites globally, Project SEARCH has supported over 55,000 interns, serving an additional 4,800 yearly, reaching an employment rate of 70% for program participants (21). The program itself, is an employment training program for youth 18 years of age and older (22) with components of classroom training and work internship placements. These components include interconnecting factors of social,

education and employment as curriculum elements allow youth to socialize among participants, learn skills in classroom settings, and gain employment experience through an internship.

4.3.2. Site 2: Community-based program

This community-based program is offered through a foundation in a medium urban center in Alberta, offering services that aim at reducing barriers for persons with disabilities (23)(24). The employment program they run operates in 20 sites across multiple Canadian provinces both in person and online (25). Since its inception in 2017, the program has had over 2,004 participants, reaching an employment rate of 50% for program participants (26). The program is catered to persons with autism ages 15 and older (27), however, persons of all disabilities are eligible to participate. Elements of the in-person program curriculum include classroom training, job search and job retention for the in-person program, and elements of the online program of goal setting, developing employment skills, and confidence building in the online version (26).

4.3.3. Site 3: School-based program

This program runs in a school setting that is an education center for youth with autism, providing individualized supports for youth through preschool, primary and secondary school (28). The school is located in a large urban center in Quebec(29). Since its inception in 2014 (30) the employment program implemented on this site has facilitated over 5,000 employment opportunities for youth, (31) operating in 30 sites across Canada (32), and achieving an employment rate of approximately 95% of youth retained by employers, (33). The employment support program is for youth ages 16 and over (34) that matches employees with autism to employers, aiming to increase employment among youth with autism (35). The program has also been awarded the Zero Project international award for Innovative Policy on Employment and Vocational Education & Training in 2017 (30), an award recognizing policymaker, practitioners, business leaders, and other experts for their contributions towards advancing the implementation of the UNCRPD (36). The program operates throughout Canadian contexts, in which one of the sites of operation is a School. Through this program the program model provides a multitude of disability-related services and curriculum elements, for both employers and employees. Services catered to the employer include disability awareness training and information, and support for employers to become more inclusive. Services provided for youth include assistance in identifying employers who have previously employed youth with autism, creating connections to community organizations that have employment-related services, and on-site support for youth to succeed once employed (37) Table 2 summarizes the main program characteristics of all three employment programs.

Table 2. Program characteristics of employment programs

	Rehabilitation-based program	Community-based program	School-based program
Context/setting	Urban	Urban	Urban
Population density (per square km)	4427.8	1592.4	4833.5
Population served	Childhood onset disability, injury, developmental disability	Autism	Autism
Program inclusion age	18+	15+	16+

4.4. CHILD-CHII Results

Based on the purposeful sampling of best practices programs, the 3 programs assessed had high compliance with the CHILD-CHII. Programs and sites were largely accessible with inclusive programs that were generally implemented in inclusive macro environments (larger community setting of programs). Programs catered towards features that were more tailored to their target clientele, with universal accessibility features such as braille and sign language lacking for informational materials. Summary scores from all three assessments of the CHILD-CHII (On-Site, Organizational, and Macro-Level) demonstrated that accessibility features were available for all three sites. was determined by calculating the sum of all binary CHILD-CHII items per assessment subsection (On-Site, Organizational and Macro-Level). The presence of available features was counted as 1 point, and the absence of features, as well as the features marked non-applicable were counted as 0. Table 3 summarizes the CHILD-CHII assessment scores for all three program sites.

Table 3. CHILD-CHII summary scores of employment programs

	Rehabilitation-based program	Community-based program	School-based program
On-Site Assessment	84/191	79/191	75/191
Organisational Assessment	25/51	25/51	34/51
Macro-Level Assessment	32/54	36/54	40/54

4.4.1. Rehabilitation-based program

An inter-rater reliability rate of 57% was achieved for the CHILD-CHII assessment in the rehabilitation-based program, achieving a Cohen's Kappa score of 0.45. Results indicated many inclusive features of accessibility in the On-site, Organisational and Macro-Level Assessments. On an infrastructural level, the site included design elements that addressed varying needs of persons with disabilities. Examples of these design elements include doorways flush with the floor and wide enough for persons in wheelchairs, elevators, lifts for stairs, non-slip surfaces, automatic doors, and bathrooms addressing the needs of multiple disabilities throughout the site, and equipment for activities that met the needs of youth available. The adapted equipment is available for families to rent, as well as to test before purchasing their own, assuring that the equipment aligns with the needs of their child.

The Organizational Assessment indicated a many inclusive features of accessibility as well, with 25/51 CHILD-CHII items. Results indicated a high level of inclusion of persons with disabilities in the policymaking for the hospital, staff available to assist people with getting around the site, and a high rating for a willingness and readiness to make future accessibility changes by the program responsible. Adaptations such as access to caregivers and assistance by staff are offered for youth to equitably participate in activities.

The Macro-Level Assessment, assessing the surrounding neighborhoods of the hospital indicated many accessible features (32/54 CHILD-CHII items) in the Greater Toronto Area. Regarding transportation, Toronto has fixed transit routes, accessibility features such as braille or audio information provided on request, and transit staff who receive disability awareness training, incorporating elements related to communicating with individuals with different types of disabilities. Other Macro-Level features included

accessible community design (e.g., walking/rolling infrastructure, wayfinding signage, programs to maintain sidewalks, funding available to improve accessibility at business locations and community facilities), and services such as volunteer/work opportunities, access to healthcare, and other community activities available for youth with disabilities. Community activities included adapted social and recreational activities such as dance classes, arts and crafts workshops, or summer camps (38). Accessibility policies and initiatives to promote inclusivity were integrated within the Toronto as well. This inclusivity includes round tables with policymakers and children with disabilities and parents/caregivers of children with disabilities, as well as the presence of a Disability Advisory Group representing children with a broad range of disabilities. These opportunities were reported by program manager and verified through online searches of city webpages.

In the “Organization Assessment” (25/51 CHILD-CHII items), one aspect that was not present on site was the availability of information (e.g., pamphlets, documents,) in formats accessible for persons with different disabilities (e.g. Braille, large print, audio or sign language). Information that catered to the needs of a wide range of persons with disabilities was available online, with virtual features that met to the needs of users such as the ability to change the text spacing and letter size on the site, as well as options to change the contrast of the information on the website and the background (options of background with white or yellow text, yellow background with black text and grey background with light grey text.)

Program managers reported the following barriers as key constraints to promote inclusion, participation and health for youth with disabilities in their programs: A) funding: changes to the structures that fund the employment service providers, minimizing the ability to fund skills trainers who train the program participants, which threatens Project SEARCH site closure and reduces post-program support that the program is able to provide. B) organizational decision-making processes and priorities: examples include prioritizing infrastructural changes at the rehabilitation center (e.g., adding tactile floors, evacuation chairs, making information available for individuals who are non-hearing or blind) which can take time to implement once identified as priorities, and challenges reported by individuals, such as personal needs of youth with disabilities as they evolve and grow in the program that need program-level agility to address, and Macro-Level changes (e.g. health status, income, family).

Future directions reported by the program managers that they would like to pursue included hiring additional staff, examining socio-demographic factors (e.g. language spoke, race, income, newcomer status), to see how the characteristics of the clientele of the employment program offered at rehabilitation center compares to other sites and trends in demographic factor and to explore how to possibly include groups who have lower representation in the employment program than in the broader community and surveying families to further promote the health of youth with disabilities.

4.4.2. Community-based program

An inter-rater reliability rate of 93%, with a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.73 was achieved for the CHILD-CHII assessment in Alberta. Results indicated many accessibility features across all three assessments. The On-site Assessment demonstrated many inclusive features of accessibility with 79/191 CHILD-CHII items. Some key features included lifts, automatic doors, elevators, doorways flush with the floor, high-contrasting lettering, large print and visual signage for navigating around the site, accessible bathrooms, spaces for guide dogs, large print information and high contrasting lettering for signage around the program site. Other services and features for programs delivered within the site for youth included sound absorbing floors in common rooms and shared spaces, non-slip surfaces and adjustable lighting.

The “Organizational Assessment” demonstrated many inclusive features as well (25/51 CHILD-CHII items). Within the organization, staff was available, and rooms were colour-coded to help youth navigate the site,

staff is trained for disability awareness which cover training components related to providing services to youth with different types of disabilities and their families, adapting environments to persons with disabilities, communicating with youth and parents of youth with different types of disabilities and using first person terminology. At the Organizational-Level, persons with disabilities were included in the policymaking for the centre through involvement in a strategic advisory group. A strong readiness for change and a readiness to support additional efforts towards inclusion and health promotion was reported by the program manager, demonstrated by a process of periodically re-evaluating and reviewing inclusion and accessibility policies; to assure they align with strong inclusion and accessibility for persons with disabilities. One feature that was not present on the site was the availability of instructional and educational material in braille or audio formats, although the organisation does have material available in large print, visual and video with caption format. Barriers reported by the program responsible included a lengthy amount of time for approvals for any changes to further the promotion of health for youth with disabilities within the organisation.

At the Macro-Level, (36/54 CHILD-CHII items) within the neighbouring areas, surrounding the site, many accessible features were available to promote the participation of persons with disabilities. Many accessible transit options were available within the city, such as paratransit, wheelchair accessible taxis, and screens and help buttons in transportation hubs for assisting persons with disabilities. Accessible community design elements such as biking, walking, rolling infrastructures, signage that includes large prints, pictograms, braille, programs to maintain sidewalks, funding available to improve accessibility at business locations and community facilities were available within the larger community as well. Other accessible Macro-Level features include opportunities for youth with disabilities to participate in leisure/social activities, as well as initiatives generating dialogue between youth, policymakers, and service providers available within the city. These opportunities include round tables with policymakers, children with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities, as well as a Disability Advisory Group representing children with a broad range of disabilities.

4.4.3. School-based program

An inter-rater reliability rate of 76% was achieved for the CHILD-CHII assessment at school-based program achieving a Cohen's Kappa score of 0.49. Results indicated many inclusive features within all three subsections of the CHILD-CHII. At the On-Site level, 75/191 CHILD-CHII items were present. There was an emphasis placed on wide spaces, minimal clutter, and infrastructure that does not hinder the movement or participation of children. Features that provided an accessible space for youth include ramps, doorframes flush with the ground, elevators, non-slip surfaces, automatic doors, high-contrasting lettering, large print and pictograms signage for navigating around the site, headphones available for noise reduction, noise reduction measures in rooms at the site, and accessible bathrooms. The information available (e.g., pamphlets, flyers) was not available in braille or audio formats, although could be provided in large print and plain text through an electronic version.

The Organisational Assessment indicated many inclusive features as well, with 34/51 CHILD-CHII elements present. Staff was trained thoroughly for disability awareness, covering topics of providing services to youth with different types of disabilities and their families, adapting environments for youth with disabilities, communicating with youth/their families with different types of disabilities and crisis intervention. Persons with disabilities and parents were closely involved in policymaking for the organisation, constituting 70 % of board members. Other accessible features include and personalized mapping photos/schemes, and staff available to help youth navigate throughout the site, and strong readiness to change was reported by the program responsible, demonstrated by an understanding that the needs of youth are always evolving and highly individualized, as well as an openness and awareness to further adapt staff training to take this recognition of youth needs into account. For equal participation in

activities, accommodations were provided to youth based on their individualized needs, such as the presence of a caregiver. A barrier reported within Giant Steps included a high turnover of staff.

At the Macro-Level, the area surrounding the school presented as a major facilitator to promoting participation and inclusion for youth with disabilities, achieving a rate of 49/51 CHILD-CHII elements. Situated in the Angus Technopolis, this neighborhood localizes community services such as healthcare centers, small businesses, schools, restaurants and green spaces (39), creating an environment for youth to engage and thrive in community settings. Other inclusive features within the area neighboring the school include leisure activities available for youth that consider the varying needs of persons with disabilities, and inclusive transportation systems, such as paratransit, wheelchair accessible taxis and accessible features such as plain text, large print, pictograms, audio and braille information available. Montreal has many accessible community design features including biking, walking, rolling infrastructures, signage that includes large prints, pictograms, braille, programs to maintain sidewalks and funding available to improve accessibility at business locations and community facilities.

Other Macro-Level inclusive practice includes organisations that facilitate opportunities for youth with disabilities and their families to meet and participate in social activities together, and accessibility policies and initiatives to promote inclusivity within Montreal. This promotion of inclusivity is executed by holding round tables with policymakers and children with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities, and the presence of a Disability Advisory Group representing children with a broad range of disabilities.

4.4.4. Inter-rater reliability

Summary scores for all three employment preparation program sites were calculated per CHILD-CHII subsection (On-site, Organisational, and Macro-Level.)

Inter-rater reliability for all three employment preparation program sites was calculated using Cohen's Kappa (40) for the binary questions. Due to the minimal presence of scaled items in the CHILD-CHII, weighted Kappa scores could not be calculated for all three sites, although they indicated high agreement between raters. A Kappa score of 0.41 or higher was deemed acceptable by raters and considered indicative of moderate to higher agreement between raters. All CHILD-CHII Kappa scores were within an acceptable range.

However, variation between scores across CHILD-CHII assessments do exist. The Community-based program achieved a rate of 0.73, the school-based program, a rate of 0.49 and rehabilitation-based program a rate of 0.45. A lower inter-rater reliability for the rehabilitation based-program, demonstrating moderate agreement between raters may indicate difficulties in assessing larger-scaled program sites, as the margin for disagreement between raters is larger, as the site has more features. A lower Kappa score at the school-based program may be indicative of how the assessment was conducted. For the Ready, Willing and Able program, due to scheduling difficulties in accessing the school site, the CHILD-CHII was performed via the Zoom video calling platform (41) for the Organisational Assessment, and a review of pictures and videos provided by the program responsible for the On-site Assessment. The low Kappa score of 0.49 may indicate that using a video/photo material, and a video calling program for the CHILD-CHII may not be a precise method of application. However, this may demonstrate a way to potentially including programs that are not geographically accessible in applying the CHILD-CHII.

5. Program review

5.1. Methods

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify youth employment programs serving individuals with diverse types of disabilities for an in-depth review of program characteristics and identification of what factors aligned with the CHILD-CHII in terms of community inclusion, and were associated to successful employment pathways, as identified in the research realist review and informed by our advisory team. The sample included one international program, one provincial program, and two federal-level programs. Data was collected through document review of publicly available program materials (informational materials, reports to community) and supplemented, where available, with information provided by program directors and coordinators. Program-level data were extracted and synthesized to describe each initiative's overview, scope, community context, and other relevant variables of interest.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. SEARCH: A School-to-Work Training Program

Description: A one-year transition program partners with businesses to provide high school students with disabilities over 700 hours of hands-on work experience through tailored rotations. Students gain employability skills, career planning support from teachers and trainers, and accommodations like on-the-job coaching. A local employment agency assists graduates and employers.

Population: Eligible students (aged 17+) may have mild intellectual or developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, speech/language impairments, or be deaf or hard of hearing. Each Project SEARCH site defines its specific eligibility criteria.

Community factors: Available across various provinces in Canada (22 sites in total in 2024/25), data from the program's online documentation highlights the following community factors:

- **Travel Training:** Interns learn to travel independently using adult transportation options. Initial travel training is provided before the program or second internship, with additional support offered when transitioning to employment.
- **Awareness Initiatives:** Periodic training is provided for managers and mentors, covering program goals, working with individuals with disabilities, disability awareness, and roles of mentors, supervisors, and skills trainers.
- **Work and Employment Opportunities:** The program focuses on skill development, career goals, and personalized job preparation. Interns engage in three targeted internships (20–25 hours weekly), gaining competitive, transferable skills while improving communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. This fosters workplace inclusion and broadens job opportunities for individuals with disabilities.
- **Access to Education:** Outreach to sheltered workshops includes skills training, career exploration, adaptive techniques, long-term job coaching, and continuous feedback from teachers, skills trainers, and employers.

Missing community factors that the program should consider include community design, social activities, web mapping, technology services, and accessibility policies.

While **healthcare access** is not explicitly mentioned in the publicly available online documentation, the program's core model fidelity indicates that additional resources would be accessed as needed to address interns' medical and mental health needs.

Finally, it is important to note that the presence or absence of the above-mentioned factors may vary depending on the program's implementation site.

Intersectionality: A study analyzing data from 3,773 interns across 523 program sites in the United States found that participants broadly reflected the population, with some overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities and underrepresentation of females, and no major variation in employment outcomes by race, gender, ethnicity, or disability type.¹ No comparable data were available from Canada.

Outcomes: Outcome measures were based on a rigorous definition of competitive employment, including integrated workplace settings, year-round non-seasonal work of at least 16 hours per week, and prevailing wages. Across Project SEARCH programs from 2018 to 2022, employment outcomes were approximately 75% overall, with 65–70% meeting the full criteria for competitive employment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. A decline was observed in 2020 among graduates completing the program at the onset of the pandemic, followed by a return to near pre-pandemic employment rates in 2021 and 2022. These findings are based on outcome reporting from 93% to 98% of program sites, including US sites. No outcomes were available for Canadian sites.

5.2.2. RWA: Ready Willing Able

Description: The Ready, Willing, and Able (RWA) initiative, a collaboration between Inclusion Canada, the Autism Alliance of Canada, and their members, is funded by the Government of Canada to boost workforce participation for individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism. The program is accessible across multiple provinces and territories in Canada, and its goals include:

- Connecting employers, individuals, and community agencies at all levels.
- Raising awareness of the business value of hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism.
- Enhancing community employment services by linking them to new employer demand.

Population: Individuals with intellectual disabilities or on the autism spectrum, with no specified age criteria.

Data derived from the program's online documentation and supplemented by insights from program directors identifies the following community factors:

- **Transportation:** For candidates hired through the RWA program who require transportation to and from the work site, the program can allocate the necessary funding. This support is available for a period of up to three months, contingent upon the unavailability of equivalent resources from provincial or territorial sources.
- **Awareness Initiatives:** The program aims to foster positive attitudes within the community toward individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism through a range of awareness activities, including organizing and participating in panels, community events, and other initiatives. Social media

¹ The intersectionality of race, disability, gender, and employment through the project SEARCH lens: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-intersectionality-of-race%2C-disability%2C-gender%2C-Buncher-Daston/8a43f042a21158e8f3db3c3a9633b98ad3fc6ce1>

platforms are utilized to showcase the successes of the RWA program and highlight the capabilities of individuals participating in the competitive workforce. Additionally, promotional materials are disseminated via the RWA and the Inclusive Workplace (TIW) websites.

- **Access to computer technology and technology services:** The program provides access to computer technology and related services as needed to support employment. For candidates hired through the RWA program, necessary computer equipment, technology, or adapted technology can be supplied to facilitate successful employment.
- **Accessibility and Inclusive Policies, Regulations, and Initiatives in the Community:** The program promotes accessibility and inclusion within the context of employment by collaborating extensively with employers of various sizes across multiple sectors. This collaboration aims to support the development and implementation of inclusive human resources policies and practices.
- **Work and Employment Opportunities:** Supporting paid work is the main goal of the program. The program addresses the full employment process through the following steps: a) creating demand to hire by building employers' confidence and capacity for inclusive hiring through outreach and engagement; b) connecting demand to candidates by sharing job opportunities with local employment agencies that recommend suitable candidates once an employer is ready to hire; c) facilitating the hiring process by responding quickly to employers' needs and supporting a smooth recruitment process; and d) providing ongoing support to both employers (such as guidance on HR practices and interviews) and employees (such as job coaching and transportation assistance).

In essence, RWA's employer outreach efforts generate potential job opportunities, which are subsequently shared with employment agency partners to facilitate the introduction of candidates for potential hiring.

- **Access to Education:** The program provides funding support for students enrolled in post-secondary programs who require in-class accommodations or support services to facilitate their educational success.
- **Web-mapping:** The program has launched its dedicated website, *The Inclusive Workplace*, to provide resources and information supporting its initiatives.

The program should consider expanding its focus to include community design, access to healthcare services, opportunities for social engagement, and the implementation of comprehensive accessibility policies to better support individuals with disabilities.

Intersectionality: In 2019, the RWA program launched an initiative to address the unique employment challenges faced by young individuals from First Nations and/or BIPOC communities nationwide². This initiative involved collaboration with ten community-based partners located in British Columbia, Ontario, Nunavut, and Saskatchewan. These partners were funded to:

1. Conduct community-based Needs Assessments.
2. Develop culturally appropriate pre-employment and employment training curricula.
3. Implement Youth Pre-employment/Employment Training Pilot Projects tailored to the specific needs of their communities.

² <https://readywillingable.ca/ready-willing-and-able-grows-new-opportunity/>

Outcomes: The program supported 237 post-secondary placements. In terms of supports provided, the largest share of total support expenditures was allocated to post-secondary supports³ (38%), followed by employment-related job coaching (36%), life coaching (11%), and transportation (5%), with smaller proportions directed toward self-employment (3%) and other supports⁴ (7%), including adaptive technologies, workplace accommodations, and clothing requirements. Among participants who secured employment, 36% received on-the-job supports funded by RWA, while any supports required by the remaining participants were covered by provincial, territorial, or other funding sources. The program collaborated with over 250 employment agency partners and delivered or participated in 1,822 awareness-raising events. Additionally, 14% of employees hired through RWA were provided with job coaches, and approximately 1–2% received transportation support, reflecting only those supports funded directly by RWA. Finally, the program delivered approximately 531 employer-focused training events.

5.2.3. TEVA: Transition de l'École vers la Vie Active (Transition from School to Active Life (TSAL))

Description: Planned, coordinated and concerted plan of activities intended to guide and support young people in planning and carrying out their life plan. It is also designed to smooth their way as they move from school to active life. In most cases, the process consists of the actions listed in the individualized education plan (IEP) and, if applicable, in the individualized intersectoral service plans (IISP).

Population: Secondary-school students (age range not specified) in Quebec who meet the following criteria:

- Have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
- Are enrolled in adult education or vocational training programs.
- Experience a significant and persistent disability due to a deficiency or face severe social maladjustment or learning disabilities.

Data derived from the program's online documentation identifies the following **community factors**:

Education is one of the key areas addressed in the transition process for participants and their life plans. School principals are responsible for implementing the TSAL process and, with the support of their school teams, identify students who could benefit from this process and the relevant partners to involve.

The TSAL guide emphasizes ensuring continuity of services between general education in the youth sector, adult education, and vocational training. The process is centered on the student's success by building on their strengths, utilizing the school's resources, and adopting a systemic and solution-focused approach. Complementary educational services play a crucial role in supporting the student's progress across different learning areas.

Healthcare access: The program is designed to promote psychosocial rehabilitation by either directly providing services or connecting individuals with community partners, such as organizations that address their support or skill development needs. The TSAL guide notes that many young people involved in TSAL

³ Post-secondary may include tutoring/academic supports, adaptive tech, life coaching and/or transportation supports

⁴ Additional/ "other" supports – adaptive tech, workplace environmental adaptations/supports, uniforms/clothing requirements etc.

processes have previously accessed services through the health and social services network. However, it also emphasises that individuals seeking to access the full range of available services should contact their regional Integrated Health and Social Services Centre (CISSS). The Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux is identified as a key partner of the program and is committed, through its Integrated Health and Social Services Centres (CISSS), to providing general services to the entire population, including young individuals participating in a TSAL process. In this context, the Integrated Health and Social Services Centres (CISSS) are mandated to evaluate, direct, and support individuals and their families, particularly vulnerable populations, by providing a range of health, social, and specialized services, including those offered in schools. The services are tailored to address the specific challenges faced by young people, encompassing health and social services, including psychosocial support.

Volunteering and work: Volunteering and work opportunities are often integrated into individualized plans, typically scheduled towards the end of the school year. These plans are tailored to each individual's abilities and interests, providing opportunities for skill development and community engagement.

For instance, one Individualized Education Plan (IEP) might specify: *"The community organization can welcome [name of student] two days a week into its day activities program. An adapted sports organization in need of volunteers for simple secretarial tasks will be approached. If the outcome is positive, trial days will be arranged during the year, enabling [name of student] to confirm his interest and build a trusting relationship with the organization's staff."*⁵

Another example includes a review of another student's action plan at the end of the school year: *"As [name of student] encountered challenges during her school practicums, such as slow performance, lack of motivation, and difficulty focusing on tasks, it was decided that she would not take a summer job. Instead, she will participate in volunteer work at her municipality's song festival and continue engaging in activities organized by the association for persons with intellectual disabilities."*⁶

Social activities: Participation in community, social network, and leisure activities is an integral part of individualized planning and intervention processes. These activities are addressed as:

- **Identified Needs:** Social participation is considered a key factor in assessing an individual's needs during the initial stages of planning. Specific actions and interventions are then designed to address these needs.
- **Collaboration with Community Organizations:** Community organizations play a vital role as partners in planning and implementing activities and leisure programs tailored for youth with disabilities, fostering inclusion and enhancing their quality of life.

Technology: While technology is not a primary focus, it can be incorporated into individualized plans based on the youth's interests and needs. For example:

*"Given Philip's interest in computers, it is agreed to continue efforts to enhance his written French skills. Additionally, the school team, in collaboration with a worker from the CISSS, will explore the potential use of his tablet to address his difficulties with oral communication."*⁷

Finally, as regarding accessibility policies and initiatives, the TEVA guide supports the implementation of the government policy *"Equals in Every Respect: Because Rights Are Meant to Be Exercised"* and the *National Strategy for Labour Market Integration and Maintenance of Handicapped Persons*. Additionally,

⁵ TSAL guide 2018, p.17. <https://santesaglac.gouv.qc.ca/medias/2018/11/TEVA-guide-2018.pdf>

⁶ TSAL guide 2018, p.19. <https://santesaglac.gouv.qc.ca/medias/2018/11/TEVA-guide-2018.pdf>

⁷ TSAL guide 2018, p.16. <https://santesaglac.gouv.qc.ca/medias/2018/11/TEVA-guide-2018.pdf>

it aligns with ongoing efforts related to socio-vocational and community engagement, reinforcing a comprehensive approach to inclusion and support for individuals with disabilities.

5.2.4. Youth The Future (YTF)

Description: The Youth the Future (YTF) program is a client-centered initiative designed to empower young persons with disabilities by fostering self-awareness, independence, and employment-related skills. Over three years, 288 youth in four locations participated in an 8-week paid training (30 hours/week) followed by 16 weeks of hands-on work experience, preparing them for meaningful employment or a return to school.

Led by the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW), YTF collaborated with local partners in each city. DAWN Canada supported the Montreal site, focusing on young women and girls with disabilities. This program was funded by Employment, Skills & Development Canada.

Population: Young people with disabilities aged 15–30 across various Canadian cities and provinces, including those with physical, sensory, medical, learning, or mental health disabilities, seeking meaningful part-time employment through a pre-employment program.

Data derived from the program's online documentation identifies the following community factors:

Participation in social activities: Youth engaged in service delivery could connect with other youth under the cohort model.

Volunteering and employment: The primary aim of the programs was supporting employment opportunities and skill development.

Transportation supports were wraparound supports offered to participants on a need basis. Transportation provided included bus/metro passes, gas reimbursements, Uber gift cards, and taxi fare. 71 clients received transportation supports in regional program. 94 clients received transportation supports in national program

Awareness Initiatives: Part of CCRW's service delivery model involves employer awareness and disability confidence (Data unavailable).

Fostering inclusive policies and initiatives: Part of CCRW's service delivery model involves supporting employers of CCRW's clients to implement workplace accommodations.

Missing factors: education, healthcare access, technology and policies.

Intersectionality: Two (regional and national level) CCRW employment services programs supporting youth were open to CCRW candidates ages 16-31 years old through October 2020-March 2024. The regional program was based in Ontario. The national program was offered in locations in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, and Nunavut.

No data were available on intersectionality. Nevertheless, the demographic profiles at both the regional and national levels reflect a broad and diverse representation of youth populations.

At the regional level, the program served 232 clients, all of whom were youth with disabilities. Within this group, approximately 50% identified as members of visible minority groups, 14% as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and 30% as coming from low-income households; fewer than 5% identified as Indigenous, and fewer than 5% were newcomers to Canada and/or refugees.

Nationally, a total of 330 clients were served, all of whom were youth with disabilities. The demographic distribution similarly reflected diversity across groups, with approximately 13% identifying as Indigenous, 24% as members of visible minority groups, 23% as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, 38% as coming from low-income households, and fewer than 5% identifying as newcomers to Canada and/or refugees.

6. Key informant interviews

6.1. Methods

We used semi-structured interviews to collect data from program directors, coordinators, business liaisons, employers and youth with disabilities who participated in employment and school to work transition programs. The interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of program characteristics, participants' experiences within these programs, and the organizational and macro-level factors that influence school-to-work transitions for youth with disabilities in Canada.

Participants were selected using a purposeful and maximum representation sampling method. Participants selected represent different disability groups and employment programs across regions of Canada. Open-ended interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed in consultation with our research partners (See appendix A for interview guide). Interview questions focused on the characteristics of the employment and transition programs, participants' personal experiences with them, the relevance of community factors to the programs, and recommendations for improving and expanding them (see attached interview guides). Microsoft teams was used to conduct the interviews. Interviews were conducted in English or French depending on participant preference; no American Sign Language was requested. Microsoft teams live captions and transcription, offering real-time text of spoken words, were provided when required. Interviews were 30 to 90 minutes long and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Along with the consent form, participants are sent a brief demographic form to inform sociodemographic characteristics of participants that may relate to their employment pathways (see Appendix B).

All transcriptions were completed by a single researcher to maintain consistency and accuracy. Transcripts automatically generated by Microsoft Teams were carefully reviewed against the corresponding audio recordings to correct inaccuracies and address any omissions. Each transcript was further supplemented with notes taken during and immediately after the interview capturing relevant contextual details and observations of remarks made after the recording had concluded.

Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were imported into Dedoose, a qualitative data management software (Dedoose, 2021). Two members of our research team independently coded two transcripts by highlighting meaningful passages and assigning descriptive labels to each segment. They then met to compare interpretations, discuss discrepancies, and agree on a code book that was applied to subsequent transcripts. Codes were grouped together into categories forming a working analytical framework.

We used the framework qualitative analysis method⁸ for the analysis of data collected in this study. Using the Framework Method, we adopted a combined analytical approach that allowed themes to emerge both inductively from participants' experiences and perspectives, and deductively from the CHILD CHI

⁸ Gale NK, Heath G, Cameron E, Rashid S, Redwood S. Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. *BMC Med Res Methodol*. 2013 Sep 18;13:117. doi: 10.1186/1471-2288-13-117. PMID: 24047204; PMCID: PMC3848812.

framework. Regular team meetings supported critical reflection on participants' responses, discussion of divergent cases, and consensus on the key recurring themes.

6.1.1. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Review Board at McGill University. All participants have been provided with the informed consent form prior to participating in the interviews (see Appendix C). The contact information of the team member conducting the interviews was provided in the consent form should there be any questions or concerns. Every effort has been made to ensure the methods used were appropriate for participants' abilities and that accessibility options were provided. The interviewer has been also mindful of participants' concerns or discomfort, which have been addressed within the research team as needed. Participants' names and affiliations were all removed from the analysis to ensure confidentiality, maintaining only non-identifiable information that was pertinent for analysis. Participants received a financial compensation of 100 CAD for their time spent participating in the interviews.

6.2. Results

Participants included 13 youth employment program directors, coordinators, business liaisons, employers and youth with disabilities who had participated in 10 employment and transition programs.

6.2.1. Interview program characteristics

Scope and Intended Population of the Programs

Key informant interviews examined ten employment and school-to-work transition programs and initiatives. Table 4 provides an overview of employment programs, outlining their scope, target age groups, and disability focus. These programs operate at varying geographic levels, including regional and provincial programs (Programs 4, 6, 7, and 10), federal initiatives across Canada (Programs 2, 3, 5, 8, and 9), and an international network active in 46 U.S. states and nine countries (Program 1).

Table 4. Characteristics of Examined Employment Programs and Initiatives

Program number	Program scope	Age group	Disability focus
Program #1	International	18-21 (with exceptions)	Mild intellectual or developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, speech/language impairments, or be deaf or hard of hearing.
Program #2	Federal	NS	People who self-identify as autistic, neurodivergent, or have a disability
Program #3	Federal	NS	Intellectual disabilities and/or autism
Program #4	Provincial (Quebec)	16-21	Any disability or learning difficulties
Program #5	Federal	15-30	NS

Program #6	Regional (Ottawa area)	NS	Intellectual disabilities and/or autism
Program #7	Regional (Montreal)	21+	ASD
Program #8	federal	16-30	Pan-disability
Program #9	federal	NS	Pan-disability
Program #10	Provincial (Quebec)	16+	Pan-disability

Most of the reviewed programs target transition-age youth, typically those between 16 and 21 years old, with some extending eligibility up to 30 or, in certain contexts, serving older adults. However, eligibility requirements may be applied flexibly in some cases, depending on the policies of the specific site where the program is implemented as well as the broader jurisdictional context.

During interviews, program directors and specialists described their sites and the demographic characteristics of the program participants.

“So, at (SITE NAME), the students that remain with us after 16 years old necessarily have a moderate to severe intellectual disability associated with their autism. So, the clientele that stays with us, we transition students out before that if they're able to return to a Community School setting and complete their high school diploma. So, the students that stay with us are able to stay in high school until the age of 21 because of their disability and the fact that they have not completed their high school diploma.” (Participant #3)

“The program was originally designed for students in the 18- 21-year age group and that is who we continue to primarily serve, that is the transition age here and in Canada, and so we, you know, we're very much aligned with that in most states. Some of our US. states allow older folks to be in the transition services up to age 26, for example, in Michigan, but generally the core of our services are for people 18 to 21.” (Participant #8)

The primary disability focus is on autistic youth and those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, though several programs also include individuals with physical or sensory disabilities (such as blindness and deafness), learning disabilities, or mental illness, particularly when these conditions create barriers to employment. While some initiatives adopt a pan-disability approach in terms of funding and eligibility, the content and delivery often remain tailored to autistic and neurodivergent experiences.

“We primarily work with autistic and neurodivergent youths and adults who are looking for employment. But the funding is pan-disability as well. So, all of the content is focused on sort of the autistic and neurodivergent experience in employment, but it could be generally applied like all the strategies we use are universal.” (Participant #9)

“Our primary our largest populations are going to be intellectual disability and autism. And then kind of scattered with sensory disabilities like blindness and deafness or both, as well as some folks more in the learning disability category if it's significant enough, but that's rare. And then some physical disabilities, some mental illness as primary and kind of... we want to serve people who need the program to succeed.” (Participant #8)

Participants included four youth with disabilities who participated in various employment programs, as well as nine additional interest holders. These interest holders included program directors or coordinators, employers, project managers for certain programs, and directors of host organizations. Table 5 presents the key demographic characteristics of the youth interviewed (participants #1, 2, and 4), while Table 6 outlines the roles and key demographic information of the other key informants involved in the study.

Table 5: Youth participant characteristics

	Median Age at interview	Autism N	Physical (mobility, deaf or hard of hearing) N	Gender Female/Male
Youth	26.5	2	2	3/1

Table 6: Other key informant participants roles and demographics.

Participant	Role	Highest level of education	Income category	Community type
Participant 3	Director of research and innovation at an organisation hosting the program	Post graduate	More than 80,001	Large population centre (over 100,000)
Participant 5	Employer	Post graduate	More than 80,001	Large population centre (over 100,000)
Participant 8	Program specialist	Post graduate	More than 80,001 (US)	Large population centre (over 100,000)
Participant 6	Employment facilitator	University	\$40,001 to \$60,000	Large population centre (over 100,000)
Participant 7	Regional director/ business liaison	University	\$60,001 to \$80,000	Medium population centre (30,000 - 99,999 inhabitants)
Participant 9	Program director	Post-Secondary/Professional Degree (Not University)	More than 80,001	Large population centre (over 100,000)
Participant 10	Employer, government	Post graduate	More than 80,001	Large population centre (over 100,000)
Participant 11	Project coordinator	Post graduate	More than 80,001	Large population centre (over 100,000)
Participant 13	Employer	University degree (Bachelor's degree)	\$40,001 to \$60,000	Large population

				centre (over 100,000)
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6.2.2. Perceived program benefits and strengths

When asked about the most helpful aspects of the program, participants highlighted the importance of several interconnected factors working together.

Individualized and tailored support—such as personalized employment plans and customized job matching—was consistently highlighted as essential to meeting diverse needs, with participants emphasizing the importance of adapting supports to each individual rather than relying on a rigid model.

“I'd say the development of the Individualized Employment Plan has been one of the things that's been really helpful. It really gets into how do we help people where they are right now and what exact components do they need to be successful.” (Participant #9)

“It was very helpful because it was the first program employment program that I was doing that was specially tailored for those who are disabled... So the skills that they're teaching us were not the regular corporate skills, but skills especially tailored to, you know, how you can adapt to the work environment as a disabled person and how you can also advocate for yourself and the work environment as a disabled person.” (Participant #1)

“I also I like the way they actually created a good job match for me, something that fits my interest.” (Participant #2)

“Some people need a lot of skill development, others don't. Some just need more connections. We really tweak it to focus on what that individual person needs.” (Participant #6)

“Considering what they want to do and their potential in society, instead of simply saying, “You can't stay in school because of your grades” or making assumptions about their ability. Planning for their individual path is essential... It's hard to generalize a program for everyone because each person is different — just like every person with an intellectual disability is unique.” (Participant #11)

Real work experiences including hands-on work exposure were also described as the most impactful elements. This included first work experiences and trial placements for some programs.

“And then another big piece would be the finding and keeping the work experience piece as well, like a lot of the people that have come to us, they would have never worked before, they might have had a really, what's the word I'm looking for here, like unsuccessful past work experience, so being able to support them in finding, you know, an inclusive opportunity, whether it's short term or long term, but just getting a chance to experience the world of work and to build that confidence.” (Participant #9)

“We know the biggest barrier to employment is not having employment.” (Participant #9)

“I think it's a very helpful program because our hiring managers are able to see the students work and determine whether they fit into the department, whether they're actually capable of doing the job before they even apply. So, you know they're working in that job for two or three months and then if the students doing really well and we think that they actually could be hired, we'll encourage them to apply for a job at [organization]. And it's just been really beneficial because I think a lot of the managers feel more confident in hiring a person with a disability once they've actually seen that

they can do it, because oftentimes, you know, depending on the disability, it can be intimidating for managers to take that leap and hire somebody when they're interviewing the person and they're kind of imagining, like, I don't really think this person could do this or I don't think they're gonna fit in or this is gonna be a major problem for me.” (Participant #5)

Long-term, stable employment pathways offering quality jobs were viewed as especially valuable by other program participants, compared to short-term placements.

“We look at very long-term employment. So, we don't do placements, we don't do 12 weeks here, do four weeks here. That's really not our goal. And so, they do get a lot of skills, but the main thing that they get is a career step, whether it's entry level or whatever it may be. What they gain is that stable employment and a sense of their skills being valuable to an employer.” (Participant #6)

“The pay is, you know, really good. It's definitely well above minimum wage. They get benefits, they get, you know, they're in a union. So, they got they can develop seniority, and kind of apply for different positions once they're in the Union. So, I think definitely the jobs that they're able to get within our organization are really high-quality jobs.” (Participant #5)

Finally, in-school enterprises, such as cafés and creative spaces, provided safe environments to practice skills, while community-based placements and employer-linked opportunities offered real-world exposure, skill application, and career entry points.

“We have a series of internal social enterprises, so we have an in-school café, we have a creative space, we have a flower arranging set up, so we have different social enterprises here in the building that allow them to gain work experience also, but in a controlled environment where we can, you know, really support their learning. And then we also have community-based work experience programs where they'll go out and actually you know work or, you know, have experienced programs in the community, so that obviously is an important piece of starting to, you know, get a sense of where their interests lie in terms of work with their skills and challenges.” (Participant #3)

Participants highlighted the importance of **integrated skill-building curricula** that combined life skills, employability training, financial literacy, self-advocacy, workplace relationship skills, and disability-specific skill development. They particularly valued that these skills were adapted to their lived realities, ensuring the training was both relevant and empowering.

“So, there they do in-school training, so they have classes on, you know, many types of things you know, life skills, cooking skills, all of those kinds of things we're addressing, you know, support needs and where we can be, you know, prioritizing autonomy again.” (Participant #3)

“The skills that they're teaching us were not the regular corporate skills, but skills especially tailored to how you can adapt to the work environment as a disabled person and how you can also advocate for yourself... Most of the things that I'd start doing the first three weeks... I'm actually using them. How to advocate for yourself and how to manage your time.” (Participant #1)

“Team building, self-advocacy, health and wellness, even financial literacy... how to maintain, how to keep a job.” (Participant #8)

“She continues to learn new skills and that is always the goal.” (Participant #10)

“Building healthy relationships in the workplace, and that is about that personal interaction between individuals that happens in the workplace and how our students, how our interns can understand the difference between interacting with a family member, a friend, a coworker, a manager.... What

is appropriate behavior? public versus private, all of those things that can really impact employment success.” (Participant #8)

Across interviews, participants consistently identified individualized, relational **accompaniment and ongoing job coaching**—including one-to-one human support, patient guidance, and follow-along services after job placement—as among the most valued and distinguishing aspects of the programs.

“That one-to-one human support is something... within the top three supports that people are looking for.” (Participant #9)

“C’est vraiment l’aspect de l’accompagnement, c’est vraiment ce qui ressort le plus.” (Participant #13)

(It’s really the accompaniment aspect that stands out the most). [Translation from French quote above]

“Le programme nous est très utile parce qu’il permet de financer cet accompagnement-là, de bonifier le financement de l’accompagnement, donc de participer, ça vient, ça s’inscrit dans ce qu’on doit mettre en place pour offrir le l’accompagnement. Donc avec [Nom du programme], tu as un excellent soutien là-dedans et je dirais dans tous les emplois qui ont été soutenus, on peut dire par [Nom du programme], je dirais qu’il y a un taux de succès peut être autour de 95, 96%.” (Participant #13)
(The program is very useful to us because it helps fund this type of support, essentially enhancing the funding for accompaniment services. It contributes to and aligns with what we need to put in place to provide that support. So, with [Program Name], you have excellent backing in that regard. I would say that across all the jobs supported through [Program Name], the success rate is around 95–96%). [Translation from French quote above]

“She was very friendly... very patient and taking things gradually and slowly, not rushing things for me.” (Participant #2)

“We do training, we do employment preparation and search, and then we make sure that there is a follow along prong... that is what we think makes us different.” (Participant #8)

Collaboration and partnerships among schools, employment agencies, community providers, and referral organizations—along with joint employer preparation such as training interviewers to conduct adapted interviews for neurodivergent candidates—was identified as a defining feature of the **programs’ integrated models**.

“We bring everybody together in one intense year, so they really are ready.” (Participant #8)

“Mais au début, par exemple, on demande à former les intervieweurs de l’entreprise avant qu’ils rencontrent nos candidats ... sur comment, par exemple, faire une entrevue adaptée pour des personnes neurodivergentes. S’ils choisissent d’embaucher quelqu’un qu’on leur a présenté, on va préparer l’arrivée de la personne auprès de l’équipe.” (Participant #13)

(But at the beginning, for example, we ask to train the company’s interviewers before they meet our candidates (...) on how to conduct an interview adapted for neurodivergent individuals. If they choose to hire someone we have referred, we then help prepare the person’s arrival within the team). [Translation from French quote above]

“On est là pour offrir un service complémentaire au service offert par les organismes en employabilité... Il y a aussi des organismes d’insertion, qui ont déjà des programmes préétablis étalés sur 6 à 12 mois, ce sont des programmes généralement rémunérés, en général financés par service Québec et où ces personnes-là vont être formées, rodées sur différentes tâches, différents emplois.

Donc à ce moment-là, ce sont surtout ces partenaires-là qui vont avoir une meilleure idée de la compétence de ces jeunes avant qu'ils soient embauchés. Nous, on se base sur l'expertise de ces organismes-là qui vont déjà être au courant de la compétence de ces jeunes avant de nous les référer, c'est à dire de nous envoyer le CV. Et puis nous, on va faire le lien avec l'employeur pour qu'ils puissent avoir accès à l'emploi.” (Participant #7)

(We are here to offer a service that complements the services provided by employment support organizations... There are also integration organizations that already have pre-established programs lasting 6 to 12 months. These are generally paid programs, usually funded by Services Québec, where participants are trained and gain experience across different tasks and jobs. At that point, these partners are the ones who have a better understanding of the skills of these youth before they are hired. We rely on the expertise of these organizations, which are already aware of the youths' competencies before referring them to us—that is, before sending us their CVs. Then we connect with employers so that these young people can access employment). [Translation from French quote above]

Successful programs were also described as **building readiness for adulthood**:

“I think we are this the strongest program to make that bridge into adulthood in that last year of high school, to go right into the Community and be prepared and confident. I think that's one of the pieces that makes us really different.” (Participant #8)

Finally, beyond employment outcomes, participants described transformative growth in confidence and independence, with one noting the excitement of entering a corporate environment for the first time.

“It really fosters this amazing sense of independence and earning their own money.” (Participant #6)

“So they're supposed to have constant growth and learning and being held to a standard, maybe for the first time in their lives are being held to the same standard as anybody else in an employment scenario, and it's a real learning experience and it's a huge opportunity for confidence building and the way we see the young people in the program just explode in their capacities and explode in their abilities and in their confidence and in their independence is tremendous to see.” (Participant #8)

“Getting used to be in an environment where I have to work with other people who are not disabled with me and work face to face. It's really exciting” (Participant #1)

In conclusion, the most helpful aspects of the programs are not singular components but rather the integrated combination of individualized planning, structured skill development, real-world work experience, sustained follow-along support, and strong cross-sector collaboration, alongside active employer engagement and a focus on long-term career outcomes. Across interviews, programs appeared most effective when these elements worked synergistically—particularly through the integration of training, job development, and progressive, well-supported exposure to real work environments that builds participants' confidence over time.

“What do I think works best? I think it's a combination of all of those things... I think what's unique about our program is it's all those factors together. We do everything in this intensive year, so when we talk about the curriculum piece, we have our employability skills, curriculum that has 9 core components that include you know, team building, self- advocacy, health and wellness, even financial literacy, job search how to maintain, how to keep a job, all of these components are in our core curriculum.” (Participant #8)

6.2.3. Key insights on program improvement

When asked what they would modify about the program, several participants highlighted **insufficient funding** as a barrier and calls for “more resources” were consistent across multiple responses.

“One thing I would change is funding... Some other programs we do want to do really extensively and maybe bring in a lot of more specialists to teach you. But then the funding is not enough to, you know, bring these kinds of people on board or maybe some places or some equipment that you they may they actually need to carry out some trainings, they don't have enough funding to bring up all of the things on board.” (Participant #1)

“I would just like to see us generating more of those work experience opportunities because we have seen the impact so I think if I had more resources or people dedicated to be able to do that, that would be ideal.” (Participant #9)

“In most Canadian provinces, certainly in Ontario, there is not integrated funding for employment programming, employment training programming while young people are in high school.” (Participant #8)

Participants noted **challenges in collaboration between sectors** (education, health, community, workplaces) and placed the burden on families to navigate fragmented systems. Others wished for broader, more holistic services beyond employment alone, and stronger partnerships with schools, community organizations, and employers.

“The collaboration between education and health and other sectors is always tricky in the sense that it's, you know, I mean, parents often struggle to even have a confirmed and regular social worker, for example, getting them to the meetings can be challenging, so you know, I think there's, you know, there collaboration between sectors could be more and the onus is kind of on the parents to kind of parents to kind of navigate all of that right. So that you know can be very tricky. We try to do our part in helping them do that, you know, but it's a, you know, it's a complex process. Yeah. I mean, of course, you know more, more resources to do more, you know, community based. I think learning experiences you know we do the best we can with the resources we have. But you know, I think there's always opportunities for more school and community collaboration. So with workplaces, for example, to do you know workplace-based programming and so on. So you know, we're always looking for new partners to, to where we can send our students out into the community to have experience and so on.” (Participant #3)

“I also wish that we could do more than just employment. I know that's what we do and that's great and it's very meaningful, but I wish if there was a way to provide more comprehensive services, but right now we utilize community partners to give that sort of blanket of support.” (Participant #6)

One participant suggested broadening **eligibility** to include youth on work or student visas highlighting the need for more inclusive programming.

“I have lots of things, probably the eligibility criteria. I would love to be able to serve people who are on a work visa or student visa or you know, any of these alternate working situations, that would be great.” (Participant #6)

While some programs report strong results, some participants aspire to **higher employment success rates**.

“I would have more people in every program and I would increase, you know, our outcomes are really good. But I would love to see, you know, 80, 90% of all of our students get jobs and we are more in the 70 percent, 65 to 70% range depending on what country you're in. And so, I think I would love to see even more employment success coming out, but some of that is that students come out of the program and say, I don't want to work or family say, she doesn't need to work.” (Participant #8)

Participants also highlighted **limited outreach and publicity** especially as related to the difficulty in reaching potential applicants, limited promotion budgets, reliance on specific platforms, and restrictive registration windows, resulting in low enrollment. This also included serving remote regions (e.g., Labrador) and limited reach into Indigenous communities.

“Ce serait surtout de la publicité en fait, nous, c'est ce qui nous manque le plus. Oui, le ministère met en place des publicités ciblées sur les réseaux sociaux, etc. Mais ce n'est pas tout le monde qui suit le ministère et qui a envie forcément, de lire ou d'écouter les vidéos du ministère, parce que c'est très ciblé Mais on pourrait peut-être essayer de, si on avait à changer quelque chose, ce serait de le rendre plus publicisé pour que les gens puissent s'inscrire plus facilement, même les entreprises, surtout dans certaines régions, et pourquoi pas de le rallonger un peu.” (Participant #11)

(It would mainly be about publicity, actually—that's what we lack the most. Yes, the ministry does run targeted ads on social media and so on. But not everyone follows the ministry or necessarily wants to read or watch its videos, since they're very targeted... So perhaps we could try—if we had to change something—it would be to make it more widely promoted so people can sign up more easily, including businesses, especially in certain regions, and why not extend the duration a bit). [Translation from French quote above]

“Figuring out how to get more applicants into the program... Some programs our average cohort is 8 students. We would much prefer it to be more like 10 or 12 students in each cohort that we think works really, really well but our group, you know, we are having fewer and fewer. Actually, this year, we're at 7 is our average.” (Participant #8)

“There are definitely demographics I wish we had more interaction with. So, we're in St. John's Newfoundland, there's difficulty reaching folks and Labrador. There's definitely, I guess, room for our services, but it is so far away and there is a level of cultural competence that needs to be considered as well. So, it would be nice to support in more indigenous communities and places like that, but other than Labrador, I think we do a pretty good job of reaching different people here.” (Participant #6)

In addition, provincial and corporate commitment was identified as insufficient.

“Par exemple, je pense qu'au niveau provincial, les gouvernements ne sont pas suffisamment impliqués. Donc je pense qu'il faudrait peut-être avoir un programme de plaidoirie auprès des gouvernements pour qu'ils puissent, c'est à dire les entreprises gouvernementales puissent être plus inclusives, soient plus ouverts à embaucher des personnes autistes qui ont une déficience intellectuelle... Qu'il s'agisse de jeunes qui sont en âge de travailler et ou qui peuvent avoir accès à des stages dans ces entreprises-là, parce que c'est important pour les jeunes d'avoir des stages, d'avoir aussi un pied à l'intérieur, un pied à terre, c'est à dire dans l'entreprise, avant même de commencer à travailler. Donc je trouve qu'il y a un manque d'ouverture de la part de ces entreprises-là et aussi d'autres grandes entreprises. Donc, il y a une sensibilisation qui mériterait d'être faite à ces niveaux là pour étendre l'accessibilité de ce programme.” (Participant #7)

(For example, I think that at the provincial level, governments are not sufficiently involved. So, I believe there should be an advocacy program targeting governments so that government-run companies can become more inclusive and more open to hiring autistic individuals who have an intellectual disability. Whether it's young people who are of working age or who could have access to internships in those companies—because it is important for youth to have internships and to get a foot in the door even before they start working. So, I find that there's a lack of openness from these companies, as well as from other large corporations. There needs to be greater awareness-raising at these levels to expand the accessibility of the program). [Translation from French quote above]

One participant expressed frustration with heavy federal reporting requirements, though they acknowledged the funder's role.

"All the reporting that the federal government makes us do is one of the things I think, but as a funder, they are, you know they have the right to do that, I think." (Participant #9)

Finally, only one participant did not identify any major gaps:

"I feel like overall the program has been a very wonderful one and I can't really think about anything that was, you know, a negative aspect of it." (Participant #2)

In conclusion, participants identified several key barriers and areas of weakness, including limited funding and resources, insufficient cross-sector collaboration, and challenges related to program access and eligibility. Their suggestions converge on the need for both structural improvements, such as enhanced funding, resources, collaboration, eligibility, and advocacy, and broader system-level changes, including stronger government and employer engagement and a reduction in administrative burden.

6.2.4. Intersectionality

When asked whether the program considers intersectionality, participants highlighted that it is addressed in several ways—primarily through general inclusivity, awareness, partnerships, and specific program components—rather than through a formal or explicitly structured approach.

In particular, program directors and coordinators demonstrate conceptual **awareness of intersectionality** and have initiated training and discussions on the topic, although they acknowledge that translating this awareness into concrete program practices remains a work in progress.

"It's something that I personally think about a lot and you know it's something that we've held conferences on. So, we've tried to provide training for our staff about intersectionality and autism, but it's at a kind of a structural level. I think it's something that we still need to think more about, like how that what that actually means then in terms of how we do what we do and you know how we can be more responsive to those in different intersectionalities that exist." (Participant #3)

Participants recognized that systemic barriers influence access to services, particularly due to biases in diagnostic pathways, while other program representatives emphasized the compound barriers experienced by individuals with multiple or non-visible disabilities and the need to raise awareness among employers and service providers.

"We predominantly see, yeah, white males, younger white males as well because they had the chance to be diagnosed earlier and we're really missing, I think a lot of groups that haven't, either accessing a diagnosis has been a challenge or culturally it's something that's a challenge or the

actual diagnostic criteria isn't suited to different groups as well ... You know, we don't need a formal diagnosis for someone to be in the program, but just even that self-understanding is not available to so many people. So, I do think we miss a good amount of people as well. So, we're trying to fix that, but that's a challenge.” (Participant #9)

“We have a lot of folks that experience compounding and intersecting disability diagnosis or experiences, and so there's been a big focus on working with recruiters and managers to understand episodic disabilities as opposed to things that are constantly visible or apparent. Um, you know, I often self-disclose I have a non-visible episodic disability and it's been a really useful tool for me when talking with employers and like I also have a disability and I do all of this every day, you know. And so that's been very powerful. We do experience a lot of folks that see very black and white, so it's like you have a disability, it means you're in a wheelchair or you have a cane. You have, you know XYZ. And so, we, we have a lot of conversations and there still is a lot of biases or I guess lack of awareness of the intersecting barriers that people with disabilities experience”. (Participant #6).

Many programs address intersectionality through a general commitment to inclusivity rather than designing services specifically around intersecting identities. Programs also relied on **partnerships with community organizations** to better support individuals whose experiences involve multiple social identities, such as Indigenous communities or LGBTQ+ populations.

“C'est que nous dans nos programmes c'est un peu `bienvenue à tout le monde`. Et puis si jamais on voit qu'il y a par exemple de la difficulté avec la Communauté LGBTQ, on a des partenaires donc on va aller travailler conjointement avec un partenaire pour aller sensibiliser le milieu parce qu'on voit que finalement, il y a d'autres préjugés que le handicap... On comprend, puis on comprend très bien là la problématique, puis tout ce qui peut se poser comme considération. Mais nous on fait des programmes qui sont super inclusifs de façon générale. Donc oui, on a la considération, mais ça ne s'applique pas vraiment dans le cadre de nos programmes.” (Participant #11)

(In our programs, it is more of a `welcome to everyone` approach. If we notice specific issues, for example, with the LGBTQ community, we work with partners —we collaborate with them to raise awareness in the environment, because we see that there can be other prejudices beyond disability... We understand the issue very well, and all the considerations that come with it. But overall, our programs are designed to be highly inclusive. So yes, we take it into account, but it doesn't really apply directly within the framework of our programs). [Translation from French quote above]

“C'est que nous on était les seuls à accueillir tout le monde. À partir du moment où ils sont handicapés, ils peuvent venir chez nous, même s'ils sont ex-détenus, même s'ils sont ex-toxicomane, même s'ils sont nouvel arrivant, même s'ils sont parent monoparental, s'ils ont puis ils peuvent avoir plus qu'une condition physique, sensorielle et tout, il n'y a jamais eu d'exclusion, il n'y a pas de critère d'exclusion. Donc au fond, oui, l'intersectionnalité pour moi personnellement, ça a été toujours quelque chose de naturel... Donc, est-ce qu'on fait des choses particulières ? Ben moi je dirais, le cas échéant, on va devoir s'éduquer un peu.” (Participant #13)

(We were actually the only ones who welcomed everyone. As long as they have a disability, they can come to us—even if they are former inmates, former substance users, newcomers, single parents, or if they have multiple conditions, whether physical, sensory, or otherwise. There has never been any exclusion; there are no exclusion criteria. So, in that sense, for me personally, intersectionality has always been something natural... Do we do anything specific? Well, I would say that when needed, we take the time to educate ourselves a bit). [Translation from French quote above]

“Now, in terms of intersectionality, in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, we try to support that through our partnerships. Our partners are in... they're in all different kinds of settings; we overserve young

people for example of black and African descent in our program because they are overrepresented in special education.” (Participant #8)

“We have an indigenous cultural centre here called first light that can provide some really great support for people who are indigenous and seeking employment and are maybe not finding the services they need in non-indigenous spaces.” (Participant #6)

“We work with several tribal governments, so we do have programs that are based in, you know, what we would consider Native American or indigenous reservations. We are working very hard to improve and increase our relationship with the tribes in the US, with the indigenous populations and governments in the US and we have had success we, you know, we were partnered closely with the Navajo Nation in Arizona for example. So, I think it is always on our minds that we want to make sure we're serving everybody who needs us and that's the goal and to support our programs in supporting the people who need them as well. That's why we have those additional curricula around those issues, so that they can use them.” (Participant #8)

Finally, intersectionality is sometimes considered in **recruitment or organizational decision-making processes**, particularly in contexts where representation is a priority.

“The hiring process at the government of Canada are as you can imagine cumbersome when it comes to paperwork and there are specific considerations around intersectionality when we are identifying candidates for the workplace. Personally, as a hiring manager, I tend to look just for best fit, and if it happens to be like an intersection of a bunch of elements that go along with any one person, so that is great, if not than it is like so be it, like my team is representative, but all the tools are there, here obviously at [ORGANISATION NAME] the priority is for indigenous, so we always try to approach it with that lens.” (Participant #10)

“In our intake, like when we actually choose the students because they have to go through an assessment process, we do take into account intersectionality during the intake process. So, for example, we will we have, a bit of a I guess, what's it called? Like a decision tree that we go through when we're doing our intake assessment and, we do take into account, though, like intersectionality when we're accepting people into the program.” (Participant #5)

6.2.5. Macro-level Community factors

Leisure and Social

As defined in the CHILD-CHII Macro-Level factors, Leisure and Social factors relate to opportunities for youth with disabilities to participate in activities with program participants or other peers in their communities.

With the focus of programs being on employment, opportunities for leisure and socialization were less relevant or emphasized. Nevertheless, participants recognized the role that social activities may have in building skills that can be also translated to employment opportunities. Participants reported some partnerships with external organisations to promote opportunities for social and leisure activities beyond their own program or organisation/site, articulating that these activities were jointly organised to meet the needs of the program participants:

“We did both audits of the services and spaces to ensure that they were optimizing their accessibility and inclusivity. But also we launched, for example, an adapted visit time with the planetarium where they reduce some of the sensory stimuli and so on.” (Participant #3)

Programs seemed to agree on the relevance of connecting youth with resources and opportunities available in their own communities, as a way to expand their connections and belonging, while also acquiring important life skills:

“We do provide referrals and sometimes include suggestions in newsletters about the importance of social connections, or places where they can take courses and so on” (Participant #11)

“Throughout the year we talk a lot about independence and participating in their communities. So, whether that be in order to get even more experience, it could be volunteering, it could be participating in recreation programs that the city offers that are either accessible or just for the general population. It's not something that we focus on doing all those community things, because usually the like, they're getting that in other places, right” (Participant #5)

“We will discuss like the different avenues for self-care and one being social opportunities and different resources there are in St. John's that are both like accessible and cost-accessible.” (Participant #6)

Few programs seemed to offer leisure opportunities as part of the employment program itself, suggesting that supporting youth participation in community-based leisure and social opportunities may at the same time support stronger pathways to employment. On the one hand, the specialized workers offering the employment programs can help community organizations to improve their accessibility and inclusivity, on the other, youth enjoy opportunities to partake in activities in their natural community environment.

Work Experience

Work experience is defined as opportunities for youth to access and participate in short term and long-term employment activities (e.g. paid internship, full time employment position). Integrating youth into real work environments in their surroundings was presented as an important macro factor related to successful youth employment. This integration happened through active partnerships with social enterprises and mainstream employers. Participants discussed volunteering options, on-site internships, and work placements aligned with real labour market needs.:

“We certainly try to partner with the social enterprise. So, you know, even at our center, the group that does our building maintenance is called property and they are an organization that specifically hires workers that have disabilities on mental health challenges [...] Our neighbor here is called insert tech, so they are a social enterprise working in technology, recycling and repair for people with different specific challenges. So we try to also, you know partner with those groups that are that are doing that kind of work in the community as well.” (Participant #3)

“We partner with companies like St-Hubert, Tim Hortons, Maxi. There's even a mini market onsite where youth can volunteer or do internships.” (Participant #7)

“On va chercher des besoins de main d'œuvre sur le marché dans toutes sortes d'organisations, puis on fournit de la main d'œuvre spécialisée pour ces organisations-là.” (Participant #13)

(We'll go and find labor needs in the market across all kinds of organisations, then we provide specialized labor for those organisations.) [Translation from French quote above]

The abundant offer of inclusive mainstream work opportunities was presented as a facilitator for the integration of youth with disabilities in employment:

“In Alberta anyway, there's hundreds of service providers offering a variety of different employment programs.” (Participant #10)

"We are fortunate that there are so many different opportunities." (Participant #6)

Transportation

Transportation is an important construct within youth employment in the macro environments, supporting participation and inclusion. Access to public transit and/or private transportation can be an important factor towards autonomy. We wanted to explore how transportation was present in different programs across Canada.

When participants were asked about transportation options to and from workplaces, schools, or other program sites in their communities, a range of barriers tied to community context became evident.

The lack of accessibility of existing public transit infrastructure was the most prevalent barrier to use:

"Our busing system is not accessible, like at all. We don't have subways. We don't have... even our city buses are not accessible. Our sidewalks are not accessible" (Participant #6)

When accessible options were available, they often did not adequately respond to the needs of youth to fully integrate community and employment opportunities:

"We do have one physically accessible bus service called Gobus. It's not very good. We've had people not been picked up from workshops, the bus not showing up for various appointments. So that sort of thing, it's really not reliable. But we try to do what we can with the resources that are here, but transportation is the biggest barrier, I would say." (Participant #6)

Some participants noted the lack of transportation systems that adequately serve persons with disabilities, particularly outside metropolitan areas:

"St. John's and surrounding areas and public transportation is only available within the urban like Metro Region, and so it becomes quite difficult." (Participant #6)

Another important macro factor shaping transportation use in community contexts was a combination of parental involvement and availability of public transit, interacting with youth's age and autonomy:

"Our students are generally transported here by the school board... So up until 21 after 21, then it changes from the school board to Transport Adapté, but we help we coordinate with the family and Transport Adapté for that for adult participants. Again, it depends on the school board, some school boards do not transport their students, in which case it's typically the families that would transport them here." (Participant #3)

Some programs mentioned including public transit management as part of the skills integrated or benefits offered through the employment programs. Supporting youth learning of public transit systems, practical opportunities to complete application forms, practice navigation skills, or providing funds for public transit or partnering with existing adapted transit were perceived as facilitators done at the meso-program level impacting youth's ability to navigate the macro environment:

"We have some students that travel independently here on public transportation, in particular to the adult program. And then when they go out into the community, then yes, we would, we would coordinate the transport. We also, you know, we facilitate getting them opus cards and those kinds of things as well. So, we have a day when they can do their opus card procedure here in [PROGRAM NAME] and those kinds of things." (Participant #3)

"The local partners generally do provide access to transportation. They, you know, it might be a school system that pays for it. It might be, you know, a different pot of money locally. It might be

that the city provides transportation to people with disabilities, and they're on a van or whatever the local adult transportation system is, or the school transportation can tap into that. That's what we want, but we prefer is that they don't show up on a school bus every day because we want them to move away from that. But sometimes do they get picked up from a biased school bus and then brought somewhere and then take a van or a taxi or a carpool the rest of the way.” (Participant #8)

Communities across Canada present with system-level challenges, particularly the coordination of resources across sectors and integration of youth into community life – through transportation - as they grow older.

Education

Education includes pedagogy at multiple levels (high-school, college/university, and/or vocational schools).

Partnerships across employment programs and a variety of institutions supported educational goals for youth with disabilities within employment contexts. Education was understood as acquisition of specific vocational skills and pursuit of higher education, and employment programs had a dual role of both preparing youth participants to access other education opportunities and helping educational institutions to improve their disability services to accommodate for their participants and others in the future:

“In partnership with the [Local school board] [...] we had satellite classes that we partnered with them [...] then when we moved to our new facility, we integrated them here. So that is, you know, a mix of both adult, more basic adult education programming for those with higher support rates as well as programs that are more oriented towards work.” (Participant #3)

“We have partnerships with colleges and universities, particularly their accessibility services, to help these youth access education.” (Participant #7)

“If someone is hoping to not work and go back to school, then we would refer them to a community partner that can focus on that for them.” (Participant #6)

Both school-to-work programs situated within school contexts, and youth employment programs that happen in community contexts tried to establish connections with either higher education or local community resources, revealing the importance of partnerships and knowledge of the local communities where youth live to support adequate educational attainment that may create opportunities for employment.

Access to Healthcare

Access to healthcare is defined as elements related to health promotion. Health promotion and access to healthcare is a key component in assuring equitable access to employment, as health can be integral to being able to maintain work, and therefore achieve and maintain independence. Similar to connections with the educational system, access to healthcare in employment programs was done through collaborations and partnerships with external organisations, primarily through referrals addressing various healthcare needs of youth participants:

“We've also done things like mobile optometry labs, so we've had optometrists come here to do eye testing on our students that where it's more difficult to get them to go into a clinic to do that and so on.” (Participant #3)

Remote consultations in regions were also mentioned as a helpful resource to support healthcare access to youth:

“There is an app called [name of App] where you can virtually visit doctors throughout Newfoundland because there might be a doctor in a rural community with a small caseload but can take appointments virtually from Saint John, that sort of thing.” (Participant #6, employment facilitator)

Notably, a recurring theme was mental health care: many participants mentioned the need for mental health services and challenges in accessing them within their communities:

“We've had several students who had, like, mental health concerns during the program. And so, we would refer them to mental health services in the community or through the school board.” (Participant #5)

“We do support a bit with that navigating there and referrals to like free counseling, low-cost counseling.” (Participant #6)

“Every job seeker gains access to Homewood health, which is an employee family and assistance program. So, within that service itself, [...] there's things like mental health counselling, short term right, but it's still there [...] there's other health care resources there, for example, like smoking cessation, there's other mental health supports within there as well.” (Participant #9)

No mention of health promotion initiatives such as mental health awareness or physical activity promotion, or ongoing health services like wellness check-ups were indicated. Even for employment programs occurring within the health sector (i.e. rehabilitation centers) there was not an explicit understanding of “employment” as one important element for health.

Awareness Raising

Many employment programs emphasized their role in awareness raising and fostering positive attitudes toward youth with disabilities within their employment spaces as part of their program’s mission. Programs led several community-based initiatives, including job fairs, conference presentations, and educational training for staff and employees at partners’ sites to foster mutual understanding about disabilities and potentialities, show capacities of youth with disabilities, and facilitate the integration of youth into community employments:

“We also run awareness campaigns—sometimes job fairs. We’re planning a job fair at [PROGRAM NAME], with community members, employability organizations, and employers who’ve been sensitized to autism.” (Participant #7)

“I have presented at the Canada disability conference I can’t remember the exact name, it would have been in 2022, I went with members of my team and xxx, we spoke about the [DEPARTMENT NAME] experience, and I am regularly at senior executive tables speaking about the benefits of [PROGRAM NAME] and other support models when it comes to representation in public service there is a very robust advocacy element to it.” (Participant #10)

“On a été invité par Telus santé à présenter à leurs membres ou le leurs clients, en fait je ne sais pas trop comment ils les appellent. Ben on avait au-dessus de 1000 personnes en ligne, 80 personnes dans la salle... ça veut dire qu'on a rejoint, mettons 500 ou 600 entreprises différentes.” (Participant #13)

(We were invited by Telus health to present to their members or clients actually, I don’t really know what they call them. Well, we had over 1000 people online, 80 people in the room... that means that we reach, let’s say 5 or 600 different enterprises.) *[Translation from French quote above]*

"Each of our partner sites as well will have their own sort of educational training that's available to employers and businesses." (Participant #9)

Such initiatives are complemented by the youth participants, alumni, and ambassadors who often serve as a living demonstration of their capabilities through successful employment after the completion of the employment preparation program:

"Our alumni, our amazing ambassadors for the population, that they are able to go in and work and change the mindset of the employers who they work for." (Participant #8)

Accessibility Policies

Participants described national-level collaborations between their organisations and government systems, including involvement in pan-Canadian federal employment strategy groups, Accessibility Standards Canada, and the development and implementation of autism strategies as part of their broader influence and use of disability policies:

"We are regularly asked for input, sit on committees, even at the pan-Canadian level, to provide our perspective on accessibility — mainly in the employment field. We stay within employability, but if it's relevant, we give our opinion and try to influence policy where possible." (Participant #11)

"We've worked with Accessibility Standards Canada, we've done research projects, we talk with government." (Participant #9)

"We're actively involved in, you know, in the at the national level in the development and implementation of the of the strategy that made an autism strategy in the framework, you know, so and there within which there is an employment piece." (Participant #3)

Participants mentioned working across jurisdictions in advisory capacity and sharing best practices and program results as regular part of their activities and efforts towards improving access to employment supports:

"I don't know if [PROGRAM NAME] does it formally but they do have a federal employment steering group or federal employment strategy group that is pan Canadian and they share best practices often like every quarter there will be a meeting where we will talk about recent hires, the stats in general on the population through [PROGRAM NAME] but there is often other presenters from different provinces and the programs that they offer." (Participant #10)

"We are working with the local employment service providers in [province]. We've been asked to be part of a work group on building policy and improving access to employment supports for students and in general for people with disabilities." (Participant #8)

Only autism was mentioned as one particular disability group in the policy context, but consideration for intersectionality in employment policy seems to be absent, as shared by this participant:

"They are continually fostering the idea sharing and that spread, [...] they came back to me saying Oh can we speak about indigeneity if you come back, let's talk about integrating indigenous folks in the workplace [...] so there is like a natural spillover too often to marginalised groups generally." (Participant #10)

Technology

Technology is a macro factor that could be transformative for youth employment. Partnerships related to access to technology resources such as hardware and software, or training and capacity building of youth

towards technology use were mentioned as elements contributing to creating community pathways to employment:

"If there is someone who needs a computer but maybe needs some additional tech support or like digital literacy training, we do have partners that we work with that provide that." (Participant #6)

"Insertech is a social enterprise nearby [PROGRAM NAME]. They specialize in teaching IT skills—hardware and software basics." (Participant #7)

"We also have a partnership with Microsoft, for example, who supports us and our member organizations. Not all of our members were at the same level in digital skills, so they couldn't all help young people with technology. Today, digital skills are essential, so Microsoft has supported us." (Participant #11)

Other participants discussed public funding opportunities both from the Ministry of Education and other non-specified governmental bodies to integrate technology on job sites:

"Ministry of Education has something called the measure transcend diss [...] which basically funds adapted equipment and technology for students enrolled in Rus septic program. So that would be, you know, for example if a student needed an iPad for communication purposes. That kind of thing, if they needed a laptop." (Participant #3)

"I am not sure if [PROGRAM NAME] offers that on their site, I assume that they do, but they send an employment specialist with their members to the job site who help them, So the government of Canada provides all the equipment that they need, and then [PROGRAM NAME] employment specialist helps them learn how to use it or team members do, it is quite integrated..." (Participant #10)

One participant mentioned the abundance of technologies services available in their community in discussing why their program of affiliation does not provide technology-related services, although can offer funding for external support if needs arise:

"We noticed that there's lots of other services who are offering that support elsewhere. So, I think that's more of a navigation piece, right. And the funding is there if there's a cost associated with an external training that we could cover that for people." (Participant #9)

Web Mapping

Web-mapping services relate to resources hubs that may facilitate access to information and collaboration across sectors and programs. Only one participant mentioned a web-based mapping resource, the Jooay application. The participant identified a need to further develop these services across sectors:

"There's not other than Jooay I'm trying to think if there's other applications or websites that have, you know that kind of repertoire of resources and services. It's something that I think needs to be developed in in different across different sectors." (Participant #3)

6.2.6. Community factors at the organizational or program level

Leisure and social

When asked whether the program promotes leisure opportunities for youth with disabilities or supports social activities with families or community members, most participants indicated that it does not. They noted that the program has no formal, dedicated leisure or social component, with such opportunities occurring mainly through informal, team-level initiatives driven by individual leadership, or included only when relevant to skill-building or individualized plans:

"No, I didn't get such." (Participant #2).

"En fait, on n'a pas de volet particulièrement dédié à ça." (Participant #13)

(In fact, we don't have a component specifically dedicated to that). [Translation from French quote above]

"I can't say if there is anything department-wide of that nature... I wouldn't say there is anything specific around that.... Government of Canada, no there wouldn't be anything specific for leisure outside of work but at [DEPARTMENT NAME] for example, I would often buy tickets, because there is basketball team here in Ottawa, so I would buy tickets here for the team and like we are gonna go, [PARTICIPANT NAME] you should come." (Participant #10)

"Typically, they would really depend on each partner site, right. So, they might have complementary programs that are more social-focused but within the core of this program, I would say that no, that there isn't that available, but it does build into again like the skill building and individualized plan, like if somebody would really benefit from getting connected to social groups, maybe to work on social skills then that could be a component, but I would say it's not really a core piece or a major part of the program at all, no." (Participant #9)

When present, interactions were mostly confined to classroom or workplace settings, or occurred briefly during initial transition periods, with participants —mainly program directors and coordinators— suggesting that leisure activities were not viewed as a core or explicit element of a work-focused program:

"Well, it allows them to connect with people within the hospital community, like within the workplace... They have holiday parties within the classroom and/or within their departments. So, say if they're working, say if they're working in the kitchen, they'll be invited to the kitchen party. Like if there's a party or a meeting within those employees, they'll be invited, but no opportunities for their families to be invited because it's like a school work program. It's not like a community family type of program, right?" (Participant #5)

"Maybe in the transition weeks they might go and do something fun or they might go and do a volunteer activity. And those two transition weeks are during the orientation carried in the beginning, but this is this is an education and training program, preparing them for employment and we feel that there are a lot of other opportunities for all those other life building opportunities in the community." (Participant #8)

"Le petit aspect social qu'on développe chez [NOM DE L'EMPLOYEUR], c'est tout simplement 2 rencontres par année, une l'été, une juste avant le temps des fêtes où les gens sont invités. Ils viennent s'ils veulent bien sûr, ils peuvent venir accompagnés de la personne de leur choix aussi." (Participant #13)

(The small social aspect we develop at [EMPLOYER NAME] is simply two gatherings per year: one in the summer and one just before the holiday season, where people are invited. They attend if they wish, of course, and they can also come accompanied by the person of their choice). [Translation from French quote above]

However, one youth participant reported regular peer and family-inclusive gatherings that showcase learning, including weekend outings, cross-team activities with youth with different disabilities, group-specific meetups, and activities focused on mental health:

"We had lot of get togethers where we actually had, where our family members to come... like kind of a career day where you can bring your family members and then you show them what you've been doing so far... We also had some fun activities which were specifically focusing on activities to help our mental health." (Participant #1).

"And then we have regular get together where you just get together with your teammates and your facilitators and have a bit of fun.... we had get togethers where we just need to go together on the weekend for fun. Maybe since we are divided into different groups, according to disability, what we actually need. So sometimes we got together just with people who are within the same team or sometimes we have get togethers where we interact with others who are from, you know, who are from other teams, who have different disabilities." (Participant #1).

Most importantly, the availability of such services appeared to depend on the program's partner site, its own partnerships, and/or the location where the program is implemented. For example, two programs were delivered within a specialized school. One benefited from the school's services and its partnerships with community organizations in Montreal, which supported accessible and inclusive leisure opportunities such as adapted museum and planetarium visits, sensory-friendly restaurant times, and reserved sections at hockey games. In contrast, another program partnering with the same site described leisure offerings as community-based activities combining internships, outings, participation in local events, as well as summer camps and organized winter, summer, and arts-based activities:

"We've also partnered with some key organizations in Montreal. So for example, we have a partnership with Espace Pour la vie that runs the five science and nature museums in Montreal... And so with those groups, we did both audits of the services and spaces to ensure that they were optimizing their accessibility and inclusivity. But also we launched, for example, an adapted visit time with the Planetarium where they reduce some of the sensory stimuli and so on... Same thing with the restaurant sector. We partnered with St. Hubert so we do adapted restaurant times on Sundays and so much so things like that. Same thing with the Montreal Canadiens hockey game. So we've had been invited to, you know, where we reserve the section for our students and so on. So things like that I think are good examples of initiatives like that to help to get especially the portion of our clientele that is more isolated because of their support needs, where families are maybe a little bit nervous about taking them out into community settings if they don't know that, it'll be well adapted to their needs." (Participant #3)

"Au [site du programme], par exemple, on est situé dans l'Est de la ville, dans le [nom du quartier]. Donc les l'objectif à long terme, c'est de rendre ce quartier inclusif, c'est à dire il y a pas mal d'entreprises, il y a aussi des entreprises d'insertion. Donc on facilite pas mal d'activités communautaires où les jeunes vont, comme je vous disais, faire des stages, des sorties grand public et pour participer dans les activités communautaires, tisser des liens avec la communauté, parce que l'idée c'est pas seulement de permettre aux jeunes d'accéder à l'emploi, mais c'est aussi qu'ils soient bien imbus de leur environnement et aussi d'avoir des activités avec d'autres écoles, des activités qui sont organisées par la Communauté, disons le quartier...Il y a des stages où il y a un mix emploi et loisirs, il y a des participations à des camps d'été et aussi, il y a aussi des sorties qui sont organisées par le centre d'autisme, des activités pendant l'hiver du ski, pendant l'été toutes sortes de choses et même des activités artistiques aussi." (Participant #7)

(At the [Program site], for example, we're in the east end of Montreal, in [DISTRICT NAME]. Our long-term goal is to make this neighborhood inclusive. There are many businesses, including social enterprises. We facilitate a lot of community activities—internships, public outings—so young people can build connections. The goal is not just employment—it's also about being embedded in their community and taking part in activities organized by the neighborhood.... Some internships

mix employment with leisure. There are also summer camps, and [Program site] organizes outings—winter activities like skiing, summer events, even arts-based activities). [Translation from French quote above]

In some cases, the program supported participation by referring individuals to existing community leisure resources, without offering direct accompaniment:

“Puis des fois s’ils ne savent pas ce qu’ils cherchent, ils ne peuvent pas trouver. Donc nous on a une connaissance évidemment de qu’est-ce qui existe, comment ça peut s’appeler? Si tu fais du tricot ou tu veux te mettre au Tricot, le cercle des fermières c’est une bonne idée. Ainsi de suite, si tu veux aller, si tu veux aller suivre des cours de danse, si tu veux participer à un truc de sport, on va aider la personne à trouver des ressources, entre autres les ressources peu dispendieuses ou même gratuites... On va orienter les gens vers des ressources mais on ne les accompagnera pas dans des activités de loisirs.” (Participant #13)

(And sometimes, if they don’t know what they’re looking for, they can’t find it. So we obviously have knowledge of what exists and what it’s called. If you knit or want to start knitting, the “Cercle des fermières” is a good option. And so on—if you want to take dance classes or participate in a sports activity, we’ll help the person find resources, including low-cost or even free ones. We’ll guide people toward resources, but we won’t accompany them in leisure activities). [Translation from French quote above]

Work experience

With respect to work experience delivered at the program or organizational level, as opposed to through community partnerships, participants described approaches such as job shadowing, internships, hands-on training, and job placements in real labour market settings. These components were often structured as a second phase of the curriculum or day, following an initial phase focused on developing employment and life skills:

“We do have a component of the program which is called job sampling, essentially job shadowing, right, which is unpaid, but it provides that very, very short-term exposure to a workplace.” (Participant #9)

“They go into their internships for between 4 and 5 hours a day for skill building.” (Participant #8)

“Typically, it’s three weeks of orientation at the beginning of the year, a 10–12-week internship, a week of transition where they ramp down from one internship and prepare for the next and they’re again together as a group and they’re learning and they’re maybe they’re doing some activities of community exploration.” (Participant #8)

“So, the first two weeks of the program was the in-class program where they taught you life skills and employment skills, which are necessary, like for me, who is disabled. The life skills and employment skills, were tailored specifically tailored to how I would interact as a disabled person trying to enter the corporate world and then after that the second part of the program was a 12 weeks program which was meant to be hands-on. And the hands-on program we were put into jobs. We were actually just interns in places that were reflecting the kind of places where we wanted to work.” (Participant #1)

“Here, as part of the program [PROGRAM NAME], the [PROGRAM NAME] employment specialist comes to the work site with them for a number of weeks to help them onboard the tasks.” (Participant #10)

“For the curriculum, they learned things like money management, technology stuff, hygiene, how to talk to your boss, how to talk to your colleagues, advocacy, sexual harassment, all like all those policies. They learn, you know, they do CPR training, they get their food handlers certificate, they do a lot of different training, but then for the rest of the day, they're actually placed in work placements ... So they're really every day, there's sometimes in the classroom, but mostly in their work placements within the hospital and at the end of 10 months, they've gotten the chance to work in several different departments. They usually get to do three different placements within the hospital and at the end of the school year, we try to help them find work in the community.” (Participant #5)

However, some programs excluded this component in order to concentrate more explicitly on pre-employment skill development and job search supports oriented toward securing employment:

“The program for youth does focus a little bit more on pre-employment skills, but still with the end objective of finding employment. It does do a little bit more in like skill development and learning skills for the workplace and resume job search, interview, that sort of thing. And those are things we work on with everyone. We just do it a little bit more hands on with the youth and again with the goal of finding employment. That is our number one priority... But we work with each person to find employment and we target employers that work for them. We have some employers we work with frequently, but our number one goal is seeking finding employment so that when they're done working with us, they're still employed.” (Participant #6)

“My communication skills. Yeah, I actually got a training about how I could, you know, file some good reports. That was a very a good one for me and they taught me about how I could communicate feedback very clearly. Yeah, I think those training were very helpful to me...Also how to write technical reports, I really didn't know about technical report, writing simple technical reports, and taught me about workplace norms and about, you know how I could actually understand the tech environment...I actually, apart from the job services, I think they have also made me understand the, you know, the inclusive workplace, website resources. I've been able to read about information for job seekers, also understand about the inclusive employment practices.” (Participant #2).

Transportation

Participants were asked whether programs provided transportation options to and from workplaces, schools, or other program sites, or had support systems in place to help them access public transit and other community transportation resources. Similarly to the context of macro environments, transportation was identified as the primary barrier, due to the challenges of adult disability transit systems and the limited, often inaccessible public transportation, particularly beyond urban centers:

“Well, that is our biggest issue. If you want to know what I would change, I would change the transportation system, because in most places the adult transportation system for people with disabilities is very challenging.” (Participant #8)

Regarding transportation supports, some programs relied on school-board services, family assistance, and public transit, while also providing coordination among these options:

“We have some students that travel independently here on public transportation, in particular to the adult program. And then when they go out into the community, then yes, we would, we would

coordinate the transport. We also, you know, we facilitate getting them opus cards and those kinds of things as well.” (Participant #8)

“The local partners generally do provide access to transportation. They, you know, it might be a school system that pays for it. It might be, you know, a different pot of money locally. It might be that the city provides transportation to people with disabilities, and they're on a van or whatever the local adult transportation system is, or the school transportation can tap into that. That's what we want, but we prefer is that they don't show up on a school bus every day because we want them to move away from that. But sometimes do they get picked up from a biased school bus and then brought somewhere and then take a van or a taxi or a carpool the rest of the way.” (Participant #8)

Several programs emphasized transit or travel training as part of their employment preparation, though the duration and structure of this training varied widely across programs:

“Most people drive here, but youth and youth disabilities might not be able to or might not have the resources to do so. So what we we're able while they're working with us for typically three to six months, that sort of thing, provide transportation support. So, if they need cabs or a bus pass or something like that, to get to workshops, to get to an interview, that sort of thing, we are able to do that. However, we're not a long-term support, so what we will do is try to find other supports and resources that can be more long term for them” (Participant #6)

“[PROGRAM NAME] took care of that for us. They did a good example actually, Live Work Play assigned somebody to help her learn the public transit to get to our office. Ottawa has the OC transpo which has also a Para Transpo that can help folks... [PARTICIPANT NAME] faces no mobility restrictions so she just needed to learn what her bus route was, and so now she helps Live Work Play, she actually acts as a person who would go with another person with disability and help them navigate the transpo system, and that was offered through Live Work Play.” (Participant #10)

“So, one of the sorts of eligibility requirements is that you have to be able to independently navigate transportation to and from employment. That being said, there's been many cases of sort of transit training where facilitators have supported somebody in gaining comfort or gaining knowledge around how to use city transit, as part of the equipment funding, people can access a bus pass for a month. But, other than that, no, I would say no.” (Participant #9)

In some cases, support was limited to temporary subsidies or financial assistance for public transit passes:

“Le programme va financer le transport en commun de ces personnes jusqu'à une période de 3 mois, transport public, pour lui permettre de se rendre du point A au point B, c'est à dire de chez lui au lieu de travail.” (Participant #7)

(The program will cover these individuals' public transportation costs for a period of up to three months, enabling them to travel from point A to point B, that is, from their home to their workplace.)
[Translation from French quote above]

“I did not participate but if I am to speculate, I think maybe some kind of subsidies or stipend to help you know, cover the transportation.” (Participant #1)

“As part of the equipment funding, people can access a bus pass for a month.” (Participant #9)

Overall, most programs did not directly provide long-term transportation, but instead adopt a mix of training, short-term subsidies, and coordination with local resources.

Education

Some programs placed a strong priority on education by providing dedicated tutoring and support services for students in post-secondary institutions, ensuring that access to education is supported as actively as employment pathways:

“Il y a un volet étude postsecondaire où on va fournir du soutien sous forme de tutorat à travers un éducateur ou une éducatrice spécialisée qui se trouve dans l'enseignement dans le collège, le cégep ou l'université... Oui, l'accès à l'éducation est prioritaire pour nous parce que les mêmes soutiens qu'on fournit sous forme d'emploi, c'est à dire en employabilité, on va le fournir pour que les étudiants qui désirent poursuivre leurs études postsecondaires puissent le faire.” (Participant #7)
(There is a postsecondary education component where we provide support in the form of tutoring through a specialized educator working within a college, CEGEP, or university setting. Yes, access to education is a priority for us, because the same types of support we offer for employment, that is, in terms of employability, we also provide to help students who wish to pursue postsecondary studies do so). [Translation from French quote above]

Other programs incorporated education as needed within individualized plans or by funding career-specific training or short-term certifications, or occasionally support post-placement educational programs for interested youth, while maintaining a primary focus on employment outcomes rather than prioritizing education as a central objective:

“So to formal education, it could be part of the Individualized Employment Action Plan. Say, if someone's interested in pursuing a career that would require further education, then we would support people in navigating and getting connected to maybe that program. It's not a major focus now, the real outcome of the program is employment. Ultimately, we do have funding for certifications, which are really short-term opportunities, things like first aid or women's training, things that would immediately support somebody in becoming more employable, but I would say employment as a whole. It's not a huge focus for this program.” (Participant #9)

“We do 60 minutes of curriculum in the morning and then 30 minutes at the end of the day at least, that's what is typical... I think that's one of the pieces that makes us really different... we have the school, we have vocational rehabilitation, which is employment supports. We have long term support which is independent living and long-term employment supports. We bring everybody together in one intense year, so they really are ready and that I think is what sets us apart.” (Participant #8)

“If people need additional education in order to pursue their career goal, you know we understand that. But our goal is not to send people to college.” (Participant #8)

“Nous, on en a eu très peu des gens pour qui on a fait appel à [NOM DU PROGRAMME] pour du soutien aux études parce que les gens qui viennent nous voir viennent pas nous voir pour du soutien aux études en général... Par contre, c'est déjà arrivé. Ben on a une souplesse. Quelqu'un vient nous voir pour travailler, il fait un mandat avec nous pendant 6 mois, puis après ça il dit, je retourne aux études, pouvez-vous m'accompagner? [NOM DU PROGRAMME] permet de soutenir l'accompagnement aux études, fait qu'on l'a utilisé 2 ou 3 fois, je dirais.” (Participant #13)
(We've had very few cases where we used [PROGRAM NAME] for educational support, because people who come to us generally aren't seeking educational support... That said, it has happened. We remain flexible: someone may come to us for work, complete a six-month placement, and then decide to return to school and ask for support. [PROGRAM NAME] allows us to provide that kind of educational support, and we've used it two or three times, I would say). [Translation from French quote above]

Access to Healthcare

When asked whether the program provides opportunities to access healthcare for physical and/or mental health conditions and how such access is facilitated, findings were mixed. A significant proportion of programs did not offer these services, with or without providing alternatives such as referrals (in most cases) or assistance with navigating services. In addition, some respondents were not aware of whether this option was available:

“Non, on peut leur donner des références d'endroits où ils peuvent aller, mais c'est tout. C'est les seuls liens qu'on a. Après c'est nos conseillers en emploi qui vont avoir plus de liens locaux avec par exemple le CIUSSS, le CLSC, etc. pour les aider. Mais nous, à notre niveau, non, on ne fait pas ça.” (Participant #11)

(We can provide referrals to places they can go, but that's all. Those are the only connections we have. Local employment counsellors may have more local links with resources like CIUSSS or CLSC to help them. But at our level, we don't provide direct healthcare access). [Translation from French quote above]

“Non, nous on n'a malheureusement pas ce volet là encore pour offrir l'assurance collective par exemple, on n'en a pas.... On n'a pas de médecin chez nous là, mais oui c'est sûr qu'on réfère comme puis c'est souvent effectivement un besoin de nos gens de connaître les ressources là. Puis surtout des fois il y en a qui disent ça existe mais ça coûte cher. Souvent ils ne savent pas qu'est-ce qui est gratuit. Donc oui on connaît bien les ressources, connaît bien les réseaux, ce qui fait que nous on les réfère.” (Participant #13)

(No, unfortunately we don't yet have that component, for example to offer group insurance—we don't have that. We also don't have a doctor on site, but yes, of course we do make referrals, and it's often a real need for our participants to know what resources are available. Especially because sometimes people say these services exist but are expensive. Often, they don't know which services are free. So yes, we are very familiar with the resources and the networks, which allows us to refer them). [Translation from French quote above]

“Resource navigation, like people don't know where their closest walk-in clinic is or how to use, we have an app called medicuro where you can virtually visit doctors throughout Newfoundland because there might be a doctor in a rural community with a small caseload but can take appointments virtually from Saint John, that sort of thing. So, we do support a bit with that navigating there and referrals to like free counseling, low-cost counseling. We also have the ability to pay for a certain amount of like private counseling services, but again, it is a short-term service.” (Participant #6)

One youth participant reported that the program offered health and mental health services, but they did not use them and were unaware of how the services functioned. Another youth participant reported using the mental health services of the program and described the experience as helpful:

“They had a section which provides health mental health services for all the people who were under [PROGRAM NAME]. So, if you have any mental health need or even physical health needs, you could go up to that section of the program and you could talk to them and they will provide you services.” (participant #1).

“It was helpful because you know with my condition, you know, I could be struggling with mental health problems. And yeah, I like the option and it was very helpful.” (Participant #2).

Another program offered participants year-long access to Homewood Health, providing mental health counselling, related supports, wellness services, and funding for a diagnosis, with a primary focus on mental health care.

“Every job seeker gains access to Homewood health, which is an employee family and assistance program. So, within that service itself, there's a, I mean, it's a huge resource, but there's things like mental health counselling, short term, right, but it's still there. We also offer funding for a diagnosis as well, and within Homewood Health, there's, you know, just like any other employee family and assistance plan that you might receive through an employer, there's other health care resources there, for example, like smoking cessation, there's other mental health supports within there as well. Yeah, I would say a lot more focused on the mental health side than say, maybe the healthcare, but it's that's available to everybody for the full year.” (Participant #9)

In other programs, health was identified as a core component; however, access to healthcare was not explicitly offered, and mental health support was delivered informally through everyday staff interactions rather than as a distinct or formal service.

“We have our employability skills curriculum that has 9 core components that include you know, team building, self-advocacy, health and wellness, even financial literacy, job search, how to maintain, how to keep a job, all of these components are in our core curriculum... the staff know what the interns are dealing with in terms of mental health. They might help support their medication needs. They might remind them, you know, you need to take this medication or help them come up with a system themselves. So they know when to take it. I think it ends up naturally happening in a in a way of natural supports in the classroom and in the program, rather than being an overt thing rather than saying, oh, we're going to help you with your mental health.” (Participant #8)

Some programs relied on partner sites, such as specialized schools, to provide these services. At these partner sites, program directors reported actively working to improve access to healthcare through partnerships, such as in-school pediatric consultation services and mobile optometry clinics for students facing barriers to care.

“Au [Site du Programme], oui, il y a des thérapeutes — des physiothérapeutes, des ergothérapeutes et des psychologues — qui sont là pour encadrer ces jeunes s'ils ont des problèmes de santé mentale.” (Participant #7)

(At [Program Site], yes, there are therapists—physiotherapists, occupational therapists, psychologists—available to support youth with mental health challenges). [Translation from French quote above]

“It's something we're actively working on. We actually have a partnership that we're gonna be launching soon to actually have a pediatrician provide consultation services in school. So they'll be here at the center once every couple of weeks. For students that are, you know, for whatever reasons not able to access healthcare via a family pediatrician. So that's one example of an initiative where we're trying to facilitate access to healthcare. We've also done things like mobile optometry labs. So we've had optometrists come here to do eye testing on our students that where it's more difficult to get them to go into a clinic to do that and so on. So yeah we try ...” (Participant #3)

Mental health services were reported to be more challenging to provide directly at these sites; therefore, the program mainly supports families by helping them advocate for care. Student evaluations were

conducted by a psychologist, with recommendations focused on school-based supports rather than clinical mental health services:

“Mental health services are more difficult. I mean, we're often there to support their parents in advocating for that. So, if they're trying to get psychiatric care, for example, then you know we often are asked to write letters to support their request, to provide data, and those kinds of things... We do evaluation via psychologists. So, we have a psychologist that does evaluations of our students and provides, you know, feedbacks and recommendations. They would recommend school-based services. So, we the stuff that we can do act in a school setting, but yes, we wouldn't clinical mental health work with them here.” (Participant #3)

Awareness Raising

When asked if the program aims to raise awareness or foster positive attitudes toward youth with disabilities in the community, most program directors and coordinators identified this as a top priority. Besides the community-based initiatives previously highlighted, some programs were aiming to combine inclusive experiences, employer partnerships, and targeted communications, as well as neighbourhood-level projects that train employers and promote inclusive hiring through shared learning and mentorship:

“So that's been really I think one of the areas which [Program Site] has excelled is that you know we've tried to launch initiatives that have a scope and a reach that will that will change community perceptions. So, like in those examples I gave you of sentu where so those not only have an accessible experience program, but also employment components. So same thing we have with Tim horton's and so on. So probably all of those programs, but we tried to do also a lot of communications around those initiatives to ensure that we're trying to, you know, optimizing. We also did a project funded through Sphere Quebec. Last year, that was focused on taking a community approach to awareness. So, in that one, it was called [PROGRAM NAME]. So, we basically took our new neighborhood as a neighborhood and we did an initiative that really sought to train and raise awareness among all of the employers in this specific neighborhood. And also create links between employers that were doing inclusive hiring so they could share resources and best practices and so on. So, it was creating a kind of mentorship program as well as you know, a sharing of knowledge across a community.” (Participant #3)

In the workplace, programs educated employers and coaches on disclosure and accommodation while driving culture change by integrating youth with disabilities into real roles and promoting the adoption of similar initiatives across organizations and communities:

“So that's one of the big components of Project [PROGRAM NAME] is to, like our goal is to have culture change not only within our organization but within the broader community. So by including youth with disabilities in our departments and in our hospitals and people can see them actually working and doing real jobs in the Community, that creates a culture of acceptance and change within our organization. When they see their colleagues working alongside them, have a disability and then also, you know, we try to promote like, more projects [PROGRAM NAME] within Ontario and Canada... So just encouraging other businesses and organizations to incorporate this type of training for youth with disabilities, I think really does make a huge difference in culture change, especially in the broader community when they see people with disabilities actually being included in these types of businesses.” (Participant #5)

“We do a little bit of education with employers on that sort of thing if we think it might be an issue, but generally they are receptive. We also coach the clients and people we serve to do disclosure statements, have conversations around requesting accommodations so they're confident in those

conversations as well... A lot of our job is working with organizations, systems, employers to change their ideas about what disability means and what it could mean for youth trying to find employment.” (Participant #6)

Accessibility Policies

No accessibility policies were directly identified by program directors, coordinators, or employers at the program or organizational level, except when linked to partnerships or collaborations with government systems.

Technology

With regard to opportunities in the community for youth with disabilities to access computer technology and related services, some programs provided technology training for employment, including computer and internet use, job search tools, and digital communication, with optional specialized IT learning, while others offer structured instruction, adaptive tools such as video résumés, and access to devices:

“So yes, they did the basic training for those of us, how to use a computer, how to use the Internet. And during the first three weeks of the training, yes, they did go for that to teach you how to do your resume and how to search for jobs and how to put yourself out there, how to have a LinkedIn profile and all of those things. And for someone like me, whose interest was clearly IT-related, I was taken a bit further and talked a little bit more, you know really taken a little bit deeper to show me, OK, this is the hardware and like I was being educated towards the sector I was going to end up. But then like I said, there was a general training on how to use a computer, how to use the Internet, how to use your computer programs to prepare your resume and how to use internet and put yourself out there.” (Participant #1)

“So I mean, within the curriculum for projects [program name], there's an actual like a whole curriculum that they follow and that includes technology training for business and work purposes. So, we teach them how to write a proper email and they have to do that like at the end of every day. They learn how to put together a resume. They actually learn how to make resumes because a lot of people with disabilities don't really do well in traditional interviews. So, we like to create video resumes so that employers can actually watch them work and see what they're able to do. Yeah, they do lots of different technology learning, like learning how to find things on the Internet, putting together presentations and we do provide computers and iPads and all everything that they need to do, all that stuff with.” (Participant #5)

Web Mapping

Web mapping services provided by the programs included websites and applications offering information, resources, video libraries for youth and employers, as well as toolkits to support employment, training, and other general needs:

“We have something called `211`. It's a website. I think there's an app and you can call the phone number and they support with kind of all of those things. So you can go. I need help with food security and they can give you resources. It's kind of a resource hub. And we share that with the people we work with.” (Participant #6)

“(…) A disability confidence toolkit on our website, and it brings you through kind of all levels of employment and stages of employment and disability resources. We often provide that to our employers. There's a training, there's a lot of really great stuff on our website for employers to seize a little plug.” (Participant #6)

“We have a video library with all of the resources, all of the what we consider to be good representations of the program and some training on here. So that's our resource for our, for our sights.” (Participant #8)

“Il y a les sites [NOM DU PROGRAMME] et il y a aussi un site qui s'appelle [NOM DU SITE] où on va trouver tous les outils que ce soit à la disposition des employeurs, des organismes en employabilité, et aussi des jeunes qui sont en recherche d'emploi ou qui auraient besoin, comment se préparer pour une embauche, que ce soit pour l'entrevue, c'est quoi les ressources qui peuvent être mises à leur disposition, donc toutes les informations sont là.” (Participant #7)

(There are the [PROGRAM NAME] websites, and there is also a site called [NOSITE NAME] where you can find all the tools available to employers, employability organizations, and youth who are looking for work or need help preparing for hiring, whether for interviews or understanding what resources are available to them, so all the information is there). [Translation from French quote above]

6.2.7. Recommendations

When asked about their recommendations in terms for the implementation and improvement of employment programs ASC, participants emphasized the need to simplify accessibility standards. They noted that the standards themselves should be accessible and written in plain language:

“The only recommendation I have for accessibility standards is to make the standards themselves accessible for people. I know when it comes for a review, when I go through them, I don't find them to be very accessible from the get go, some more plain language.” (Participant #9)

Recommendations also highlighted the importance of designing inclusive physical workspaces and ensuring universal accessibility, in order to reduce reliance on individual accommodations:

“Tout ce qui est accessibilité universelle devrait être priorisé parce que là on parle beaucoup d'adaptation de postes, mais ça reste du cas par cas. Alors que si notre milieu est inclusif dès le début, il y en a plus à parler de d'adaptation de postes, ça va être une minorité de personne et même encore plus que minorité. Et il y aura encore moins de réticence de l'employeur. Si mon milieu il est inclusif, puis que je peux arriver à autant avec mon fauteuil qu'avec mes difficultés sensorielles, puis que je suis capable de naviguer seule là-dedans, je ne vais pas avoir besoin de mobiliser des gens dans l'équipe pour me soutenir. Donc je vais enlever des barrières puis des préjugés.” (Participant #11)

(Universal accessibility should also be prioritized. Right now, adaptations are mostly handled on a case-by-case basis. If workplaces were inclusive from the start, fewer individual accommodations would be needed, and employers would be less reluctant. For example, if a workspace is fully navigable for someone with a wheelchair or sensory difficulties, the person doesn't need to rely on team members to support them. Removing barriers and biases is essential). [Translation from French quote above]

“If we could make these things flexible so that people can adjust their workplaces at the outset, we can really reduce the number of requests in the system which will save us hundreds of thousands of dollars, in employee time trying to triage and address the requests... Like I am preoccupied with our physical environment as a first step because once we have the physical environment right then I can focus on bringing senior executives and managers and leaders along to be like this is why accessibility matters.” (Participant #10)

Recommendations also emphasized the need to raise employer awareness of the realities faced by employees with disabilities, as well as to increase youth awareness about the workforce and their rights, particularly through engagement and sensitization initiatives:

“Je pense qu’il devrait y avoir, puis c’est peut-être général là, mais tout ce qui est sensibilisation, on ne le voit pas forcément apparaître dans beaucoup d’endroits. Puis je pense que ça part de là, c’est que les jeunes doivent être sensibilisés à la réalité du marché du travail. Mais les employeurs doivent être sensibilisés à la réalité de jeunes avec différentes incapacités... ces jeunes-là, ils finissent par aller sur le milieu du travail, puis ils ne savent pas comment fonctionner. Ils n’ont pas d’outils fait que ça peut être déjà de la sensibilisation dans les 2 sens-là je pense ça peut être vraiment pertinent.” (Participant #11)

(Well, I think there should be—maybe this is more general—but when it comes to awareness and sensitization, we don’t necessarily see it happening in many places. And I think that’s where it should start: young people need to be made aware of the realities of the labor market. But employers also need to be made aware of the realities faced by young people with different disabilities... These young people eventually enter the workforce, and they don’t necessarily know how to function in that environment. They don’t have the tools. So, raising awareness in both directions could already be very relevant). [Translation from French quote above]

“Trouver les emplois pour les personnes. Après ça, c’est sûr que la sensibilisation est très importante, mais elle va se faire de toute façon à travers l’une ou l’autre des étapes à partir du moment où on est en conversation avec l’employeur, on en fait de la sensibilisation.” (Participant #13)

(Finding jobs for people. After that, of course, awareness is very important, but it will happen naturally through one stage or another. As soon as we are in conversation with the employer, awareness-raising is already taking place). [Translation from French quote above]

In addition, participants recommended strengthening transition and support programs by ensuring continuous support from high school to employment and providing individualized support based on youth needs:

“Young people come out of high school... if they haven’t made those connections with the community employment support providers, they can very easily fall through the cracks.” (Participant #8)

“C’est juste que la nature exacte de l’accompagnement, puis l’intensité, la durée vont varier d’un individu à l’autre selon les besoins... Avec ça déjà, ça fait tomber beaucoup d’obstacles où ça nous permet de les contourner.” (Participant #13)

(It’s just that the exact nature of the support, as well as its intensity and duration, will vary from one individual to another depending on their needs... With that alone, many barriers can already be removed or worked around). [Translation from French quote above]

Participants also emphasized the need for these supports to continue into the workplace:

“I think that people need more support. Certainly, what I’ve seen in Ontario, for example, and that’s where I’ve worked most closely in Canada, is the employment system is fragmented and does not provide the level of support that I think people need to find success. I think there is a thought in disability across the board that if you get a job and you have a couple of weeks of job coaching maybe and then you’re going to be fine and not recognizing that just because you have a job, your disability doesn’t go away. People have lifelong disability and there’s some. I think there’s some bias that if you are working and you have success in that, that maybe you don’t need supports anymore and I find that to be exactly the opposite.” (Participant #8)

More specific recommendations related to accommodations and supports included new approaches such as an accommodation passport or trauma-informed programming:

“There’s this idea of an accommodation passport that I think could be really helpful... the idea about accommodation passport essentially is kind of like a record of accommodations the same way that we have like an HR file, but we get to take it with us throughout our different employers, throughout our different stages. So maybe someone has in high school a certain amount of accommodations that they get for exams, things like that. They have it on their passport whether digital or physical, and then taking that as a valid document to access the same accommodations in another space. So maybe they transition from high school to university or university to employment, or wherever that may be, but kind of the development of a more standardized and valid universally valid, I guess, accommodation passport could be a good thing for folks transitioning out of school.” (Participant #6)

“We’ve had to do a really big focus on trauma-informed supports, um, a lot of the folks that we have a lot of like service provider trauma. So, they’ve been through a lot of different programs, been through a lot of different rehabilitation services and have told their stories and been faced with chronic stress due to all of these barriers. And so, creating a program that was supported and not retraumatizing for support for the clients is really big focus of ours”. (Participant #6)

Finally, participants recommended increased provincial government investment and stronger coordination between federal and provincial programs, as well as adequate provincial funding for coaching hours and intensive supports to ensure youth with disabilities are not only hired but also retained in employment:

“Je trouve que le Québec est quand même en retard par rapport à d’autres provinces et si on compare, par exemple avec la Colombie britannique, ou autre, et même en Ontario, je trouve que les gouvernements ne sont pas suffisamment impliqués... Donc ça, c’est le premier volet. Le 2e volet au Québec, on ne consacre pas suffisamment d’heures d’accompagnement, c’est à dire le financement pour permettre à ces jeunes de maintenir, parce que les intégrer en emploi c’est une chose, mais les maintenir en emploi, c’est aussi un autre défi. Et pour les maintenir en emploi, en fonction des cas et donc comme je vous dis d’une personne à l’autre, les besoins peuvent être différents. Les besoins sont généralement différents et ça demanderait plus de financement.” (Participant #7)

(I find that Québec is somewhat behind compared to other provinces. If we compare, for example, with British Columbia, or even Ontario, I feel that governments are not sufficiently involved... So that’s the first point. The second point is that in Québec we do not dedicate enough hours of support—that is, enough funding—to allow these young people to remain employed. Integrating them into employment is one thing, but keeping them in employment is another challenge. And to maintain employment, depending on the case—as I was saying—needs can vary from one person to another. Needs are generally different, and this would require more funding). [Translation from French quote above]

“Il devrait y avoir des accords, des partenariats entre les différents paliers de gouvernement fédéral provincial pour qu’il n’y ait pas de concurrence, parce que, en général, il y a toujours comme ... Pour éviter ce type de fausse concurrence là parce que l’idée, c’est qu’on défend les mêmes causes, c’est faciliter l’accès à ces personnes à l’emploi, aux stages, aux études, c’est diminuer le taux de chômage, c’est leur faciliter la tâche.” (Participant #7)

(There should be agreements or partnerships between the different levels of government—federal and provincial—so that there is no competition. Because generally there is always a kind of... to avoid

this type of false competition. The idea is that we are defending the same goals: facilitating access to employment, internships, and education for these individuals, reducing unemployment rates, and making things easier for them). [Translation from French quote above]

"It kind of puts all the money into one year where we're paying for the teacher and the job coaches and the business liaison, the person like me. All in one year to train these students so that they can actually be employed. And it's really important for the provincial governments to supply the funding for the job coaches. So that would be through developmental services sectors. So in Ontario, that would be developmental services Ontario. So rather than waiting for the student to graduate from high school and then provide money for training, they should give the money in that last year of high school where the teachers are still involved and they can get that support." (Participant #5)

7. Interest Holder Deliberative Dialogue

7.1. Methods

The Constructive Dialogue on Inclusive Youth Employment Pathways brought together researchers, youth with lived experience, family members, and civil society organization (CSO) staff to present and discuss findings from the YEAH project. Presentations covered the four phases of research examining employment pathways for youth with disabilities across Canada, followed by constructive dialogue done in breakout rooms and facilitated by the project's partners and co-investigators. After the group discussions, participants joined back the main room to share what had been discussed in the groups, and for concluding observations. Accessibility options were provided including ASL and French and English captions.

7.2. Results

Four primary themes emerged from these discussions, each reflecting urgent priorities for policy and program development.

Theme 1: Program Sustainability

Participants emphasized the necessity of tailored solutions across different regions and disability groups. There was a strong focus on program sustainability and continuity of support, with participants noting the importance of preserving existing support structures rather than replacing them with less accessible alternatives. Co-op programs in particular, were highlighted as needing to offer long-term employment opportunities rather than short-term placements.

"It used to be that there were offices in my community... focused on youth. And they had actual job leads that you could go to, and talk to someone... and they would help you apply. That was great. And now, it feels like what's happening is that they've all disappeared."

— Youth Participant

Theme 2: Accommodations

The discussion highlighted the critical importance of smoothly transitioning accommodations from the educational environment into the adult workforce. Participants agreed that programs must support both personal and professional development without introducing new barriers, and that reasonable accommodations — whether technological tools or adapted learning strategies — are a key enabler of success.

"Youth with disabilities want to work, and they want to contribute... In a lot of cases, it requires reasonable accommodations... whether that is technology or learning strategies. There has to be that ability to access effective accommodations."

— Youth Participant

Theme 3: Skills Development

Participants identified a strong demand for tailored employment programs that address specific needs rather than offering generic advice. Specialized training components were described as essential so that individuals feel confident and demonstrably prepared to perform specific job tasks before applying — shifting the focus from belief to evidence of capability.

"I'm somebody with visual impairment... when I look at traditional jobs, not knowing if I could actually perform those skills because of my disability is a barrier. There needs to be a training component so that when somebody goes to apply, they are already aware that they can do that job — not just as a belief, but because they can show they have trained and know how to do the things that will make them successful."

— Youth Participant

Theme 4: Inclusion of Diverse Populations

Participants discussed accessibility standards as they relate to the Deaf community and Indigenous youth, stressing the need to actively include diverse perspectives, languages, and communication styles in employment strategies. Particular concern was raised about on-reserve communities and individuals who do not communicate primarily through verbal or written language, who are systematically excluded by conventional job application requirements.

"Many on-reserve groups who don't have a traditional postal code are oftentimes just completely cut off from traditional employment."

— CSO Staff

"When I look at job applications, one of the requirements is always 'excellent written and verbal communication skills.' Right there, that means a lot of people need to self-select out... There must be working opportunities in more back-of-the-house roles where you don't have to talk to people you don't know."

— Family Member

Concluding remarks of constructive dialogue

Five key areas were discussed by participants in the concluding section of the dialogue:

- **Intersectional Research:** Deepen the integration of intersectional considerations into future research phases and policy recommendations, ensuring that the experiences of youth with overlapping marginalized identities are fully represented.
- **Sustainable Funding Advocacy:** Advocate for long-term, stable funding models for community-based employment support centers, particularly those serving youth in rural and remote areas.

- **Employer Accommodation Guidelines:** Develop targeted, practical guidelines for employers on providing seamless, technology-supported accommodations that facilitate rather than complicate workforce entry.
- **Expanded Outreach:** Ensure that rural, Indigenous, on-reserve, and non-verbal youth are actively and meaningfully included in employment pathways and research consultations.
- **Standards Development:** Translate the findings from all four research phases into concrete, actionable accessibility standards to be submitted to Accessibility Standards Canada.

8. Limitations and directions for future research

The CHILD-CHII enabled an in-depth assessment of the inclusivity of three employment readiness programs and their surrounding communities, with sites drawn from three Canadian provinces, offering a relatively broad cross-provincial perspective. However, important limitations should be considered. First, all programs were located in densely populated metropolitan areas with extensive community resources, which limits the generalizability of findings to smaller or more remote communities where service access is more constrained. In addition, findings suggesting that levels of inclusivity vary according to the target population of the employment preparation programs may not reflect true accessibility limitations within the centers, but rather highlight the need to reassess the relevance of these measures for the specific populations served. Building on these considerations, future research should include a wider range of programs across diverse geographic contexts, particularly in rural and remote settings, to better capturing variability in community resources and accessibility. It will also be important to examine programs serving youth with intersectional characteristics to understand how diverse disability profiles and personal factors shape inclusion features and to assess the relevance of the CHILD-CHII across different populations and contexts. This may inform the need for revisions to the CHILD-CHII to better reflect varying community needs and support the full participation of youth with disabilities in all community environments.

In particular, we did not succeed in identifying programs aimed at indigenous youth with disabilities, neither in the research review and environmental scans, or to include in the community assessments. We recognize, and in consultation with our indigenous organizations, that during the time of research this may not have been the priority topic for many communities. We also recognize that indigenous communities, particularly those that are more remote, may not have enough critical mass of youth with disabilities to develop a specific program. In these contexts, it could be that youth are participating in regular employment or mainstream programs, or they may be included in community life in more seemingly ways. Similarly, we didn't identify programs focusing exclusively on girls, and some disability groups were not represented in the environment scan, such as deaf and hard of hearing and blind youth.

The key informant interviews revealed key barriers to community inclusion across Canadian contexts. Even within the maximum variation sampling strategy, the small sample size of 13 interviews does not capture the heterogeneity of communities across provinces. Most programs of interviewees were located within communities of populations over 100 000, with only one medium population center community with 30,000 to 99,999 inhabitants. Community experience and Macro-Level resources within smaller communities, in rural settings, and with less population density may be very different and need to be further explored. Additionally, youth perspectives of Macro-Level factors were not captured in the interviews as youth did not discuss broader community resources, as interviews were widely focused on their personal experiences in employment preparation programs. The results are therefore limited to the other interest holder (program directors, coordinators, business liaisons, employers).

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

In this project we identified 10 youth employment initiatives in Canada that can be considered best practices and can provide insight into what programs should consider. The programs and policy development initiatives revealed that **collaborations and partnerships** are essential to the development and deployment of programs. Many programs that can be identified as best practices benefit from a combination of federal funds, delivered by national organizations in collaboration with post-secondary education institutions, rehabilitation centers, and community partners as employers. Most initiatives adopted an “all-disabilities” inclusive approach however only a small number targeted specific populations such as deaf, hard of hearing, and blind youth, youth with mental health conditions, and other chronic conditions. Thematic analysis across data points that existing programs focus on skills development, job readiness, work placements, and mentoring, frequently complemented by employer-focused supports. In contrast, comparatively less attention was given to policy development, **structured school-to-work transitions, volunteering opportunities** as a way to build real life work skills, and mental health supports in the work environment.

Across the four programs reviewed in-depth, employment initiatives for youth with disabilities vary in scope but consistently combine **structured work experience, individualized supports, and employer engagement within school-to-work or community-based transition models**. Programs such as SEARCH (various sites) and TEVA (QC) are primarily embedded within educational systems and emphasize transition planning, work-based learning, and coordinated service pathways linking schools, community organizations, and health or social services. In contrast, federally funded programs like RWA and YTF are **labour-market-focused initiatives** that operate through **employer partnerships and employment service networks**, emphasizing job matching, workplace supports, and **paid employment outcomes**.

Community factors contributing to the success of programs across reviewed programs highlight the revealed importance of **employer engagement, awareness-raising, and supported transitions into integrated work environments**, often complemented by **transportation assistance, assistive technology, social participation opportunities, and individualized support planning**. Several programs also incorporate or coordinate **access to education, healthcare, and social services** to varying degrees, though these elements are not consistently or systematically embedded across all sites. Collectively, the programs reflect a **multi-sectoral approach to inclusion**, with varying emphasis on education-to-work transition supports, employer capacity-building, and wraparound services depending on program design and jurisdictional context.

At the international level, we reviewed 40 programs across the United States, South Africa, Brazil, India, Australia, the European Union, and Japan, the latter demonstrating a high inclusion rate and broader trans sectorial approaches relative to other countries. Across jurisdictions, most programs adopted an inclusive approach to disability, with some targeted specific groups such as individuals with invisible disabilities in India⁹, or permanent disabilities in Australia¹⁰. Eligibility criteria varied widely, typically spanning ages 14 to 35 or focusing on student and graduate populations rather than fixed age ranges. International programs targeted similar areas and skills as best practices Canadian programs, with interventions emphasizing **work placements, internships, mentoring, and skills training**, often complemented by supports such as **case management, mental health services, and employer engagement**. While national contexts differed, common approaches included strengthening school-to-work transitions, fostering cross-

⁹ <https://invisibledisabilities.org/ideas-invisible-disabilities-education-awareness-support/steam-ideas/>

¹⁰ <https://www.ndis.gov.au/applying-access-ndis/am-i-eligible>

sector collaboration, and integrating both youth- and employer-focused supports to enhance employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.

The results of the CHILD-CHII assessments represent three best practices youth employment programs throughout Canada, located within three major metropolitan areas across three provinces¹¹. All programs were located within urban contexts and showed high levels of community inclusion at the macro, community-wide level (32/54 at the rehabilitation-based program, 36/54 at the Community-based program Foundation, and 40/54 at School-based program). The scores indicate the presence of many inclusive features such as access to public transit and accessible built environment and way finding, which might be positive aspects of metropolitan areas such as Toronto, Calgary and Montreal. The higher score achieved for School-based program relates to its location in a Technopolis, clustering community services at various levels (e.g., health, education, businesses) facilitating access to support systems for youth in their geographical area.

Although there are many existing inclusive features, the CHILD-CHII scores also point to **areas of improvement**. For example, opportunities for **leisure and socialization**, which are crucial for **mental health** and can contribute to better work integration, such as pools or hiking trails that are available for participants of programs in large rehabilitation centers, but not available in smaller community programs. The CHILD-CHII features 191 items to measure inclusion on sites – including the built environment and program elements. Across all three sites, the main feature that was **not available** was **access to information (e.g., pamphlets) available at the site of the employment programs in formats that met the needs of youth with different disabilities such as braille and American Sign Language/Language de Signe Quebecois, although virtual formats were often offered**. Having information available to a plethora of disabilities virtually and not in a tangible format may present itself as a barrier, as virtual information is subject to technological difficulties, and requires access to devices. However, virtual formats can also be accessible to certain publics, include other adaptive features like text to audio, and make remote access to information possible.

When considering accessibility and inclusion, the variations of findings across the three employment programs, are representative of the population they serve. For example, all three sites do not include features either at the Organisational or On-Site level for youth who have visual or hearing impairments such as information offered in braille and sign language. The fact that even excellent best practice programs can only cater for the group they serve, namely for these sites: autism, intellectual and physical disabilities, points to the lack of regulations and standards that mandate **universal accessibility** across all sites and programs. For example, ramps, doors with automatic opening, lifts will be widely available in sites that cater for youth with physical disabilities, but no available or less evident or faulty on sites that don't cater for this group. Availability of sign language interpreters and visual cues are also not default features of programs and sites when these populations are not the main population served, and mental health resources are scarcely part of programs, unless inserted into a mental health program. **Non-universally accessible practices, even in disability programs, contribute to the exclusion of disability groups or youth with multiple or intersecting disability types, creating barriers to inclusion in spaces that should be fully supported. Financial supports and regulations on programs should consider accessibility and inclusion practices beyond specific disability groups.**

In the key informant interviews we examined in-depth ten employment and school-to-work transition programs and initiatives in Canada. The findings indicate that program effectiveness does not rest on any single component, but rather on the integration of multiple, mutually reinforcing elements. These include

¹¹ Hagelstam-Renshaw A, Cardoso R, Zeidan J, Mahmoudi E, Nguyen L, Philippopoulos E and Shikako K (2026) Mapping community pathways to employment for youth with disabilities—a realist review. *Front. Public Health* 14:1743478. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2026.1743478

individualized planning, structured skill development, meaningful work-based experiences, ongoing follow-along support, and strong cross-sector collaboration, combined with active employer engagement and a focus on long-term employment outcomes. Programs appear most effective when these components operate in synergy—particularly through coordinated training, job development, and gradual, **well-supported exposure to real work environments** that fosters participants’ confidence over time.

At the same time, participants identified several persistent **challenges**, including **limited funding and resources, insufficient collaboration across sectors, and barriers related to program access and eligibility**. Their **recommendations point to the need for both targeted structural improvements—such as increased funding, enhanced resources, stronger partnerships, more flexible eligibility criteria, and greater advocacy—and broader system-level reforms**. These include deeper engagement from governments and employers, as well as efforts to reduce administrative burden.

Regarding **intersectionality**, participants noted that while programs demonstrate a general commitment to inclusivity through awareness, partnerships, and selected program components, this **approach remains largely informal, and not structurally embedded and reinforced**. Program leaders show a clear conceptual understanding of intersectionality and have initiated training and dialogue on the issue; however, translating this awareness into consistent, operationalized practices continues to be an area for further development.

Key informants recommended that **accessibility standards** use **plain language** to facilitate access to **universally accessible and inclusive workspaces** and reinforce the creation of programs that reduce reliance on individual accommodations. They emphasized the need to **raise awareness among employers** about disability realities and among youth about workforce expectations and rights. Strengthening transition pathways through **continuous, individualized support from high school** into and within employment was also identified as critical, alongside **innovative approaches such as accommodation passports and trauma-informed programming**. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of **increased provincial investment**, improved **federal–provincial coordination**, and sufficient funding for **coaching and intensive supports** to ensure **not only hiring but long-term retention** of youth with disabilities.

Among the most frequently described **barriers** in the community pathways to employment raised by youth who had participated in employment programs was **transportation and coordination** - systems shift as youth age out of pediatric care, systems differing per-school board or region. Limited accessible transit, unreliable systems, limited options in non-metropolitan areas) and at the systemic level. Differences in available public transit and the accessibility of existing systems has been mentioned as a barrier for many milestones related to childhood to adulthood transition, a key barrier for autonomy and community inclusion of youth with disabilities, as pivotal in youth access to employment (42) and central to community design.

Transportation and systems coordination are known key determinants in school to work transitions, and in gaining independence in early adulthood (43, 44). For youth with disabilities, a typical trajectory of moving from school transport or parents transporting to and from school and social opportunities is met with barriers as children grow older and may not be able to obtain a driver’s license or limited offer of accessible and safe public transit. These barriers may limit the job opportunities youth with disabilities apply for and the socialization opportunities within and outside the work space and are even more prominent in rural and remote areas (45, 46).

Mental health supports are needed for various populations of youth, and are often not part of employment considerations, however challenges for youth with disabilities in the work space may be higher, and connection between the health and employment sectors need be strengthen (47, 48). One in three youth with disabilities and 1 in 2 youth with multiple disabilities have mental health challenges, as compared to 1 in 8 youth without disabilities (49). A recent scoping review of rehabilitation services for youth with physical disabilities and mental health challenges found that **collaborations between sectors including education and social services, and contexts including home, school and community settings** was crucial for service delivery to address youth needs (50). Examples include collaborations between families, education institutions and healthcare sites to improve service access, or increasing inter-agency collaborations between pediatric and adult healthcare sites by sharing clinical data across sites and using a transition registry while transitioning to adult systems (50). Research also demonstrates **health promotion strategies** directly in employment spaces. A systematic review on health promotion strategies in the workplace researching interventions that combined mechanisms for nutrition such as healthy eating, and mechanisms for physical activity promotion such as exercise interventions, found positive effects on psychological wellbeing (e.g. stress, depression), as well as positive effects towards the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders for employers across studies (51). Further research also suggests that effective interventions to address mental health concerns in employment includes a combination of primary-level intervention mechanisms, which aim at reducing the stress factors directly within the workplace (e.g. modifying place of work or job), and secondary-level intervention mechanisms which aims at providing tools and strategies for employees to manage and process stress in the workplace (e.g. strategies for employees to cope with employment stresses) (52).

At the broader context of societal benefits and return on investment, beyond individual benefits, work is recognized as a key determinant of health, indicating experiences and opportunities related to workplaces and employment will reflect on population and communities' quality of life and well-being. On the other hand, poor employment and work experiences may lead to decreased well-being and have cascade effects on aspects like housing, food security, and social safeguards (53-56).

For this project we adopted the CHILD-CHII, a rights-based, validated index of community inclusion, to gain in-depth perspective on the extent of which different community factors influence youth participants' experiences in employment programs, and the perspectives of individuals developing employment programs about their influence in their community, as well as the community influence on employment programs. Adopting a strong, theoretical and normative-based framework can support the development of programs and policies that consider inclusion and accessibility beyond the usual factors associated to leisure, and allow for considerations of other indicators and determinants that can contribute to health and well-being, that in turn will lead to inclusive employment opportunities. **The use of a clear and comprehensive indicators' framework can also support benchmarking and evaluation** of programs, another area that is lacking. Many publicly funded programs do not have a clear evaluation framework that considers various outcomes such as **satisfaction and quality of life in the employment places**, and also lack **longitudinal data on how effective programs are in supporting employment retention**.

This research project also shed light on the relevance of cross-sectorial partnerships, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. Through the collaborative processes of different networks and resources, the collaborative processes create opportunities for social innovation, public-private partnership and policy and program delivery (57). The emphasis on cross-sectorial collaboration can be further identified through systems providing resources specifically for youth. For example, a case-study examining cross-sectorial supports in a school district high-school specific career curriculum program found that open communication between schools, community, and business leaders is important to successful cross-sectorial collaboration and can improve academic achievements. Findings of the case study reported

outcomes including deepened trust between partners with sustained expectation and demonstration of investment in the initiative, and a need for sustained communication processes between systems. A collaborative project between employment job centers, school districts and a National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities offered a customized employment process for youth, coordinating transition services, (between pre-employment services and employment) that can be adapted to a school schedules or summer employment programs. Outcomes report better understanding of adult service agencies (e.g. mental health services, work incentives, services in centers for independent living) and employment market (e.g. available jobs), improved self-determination and better ability to communicate their needs (58). Positive outcomes can be further observed in the results of an initiative to implement systems change for youth with developmental disabilities (59, 60).

Community integration and cross-sectoral goal alignment, community resilience and social capital can be created through systems integration and coordination, and supported by adequate standards that consider the needs of youth and leverage and foster coordination/cooperation (61).

9.1. Summary Recommendations

Table 7 below describes key recommendations based on the project findings. Figure 1 illustrates the summary key points of our research project, including recommendations for policy and standards, and a description of key factors contributing to youth employment, and gaps in the research and current programming across Canada.

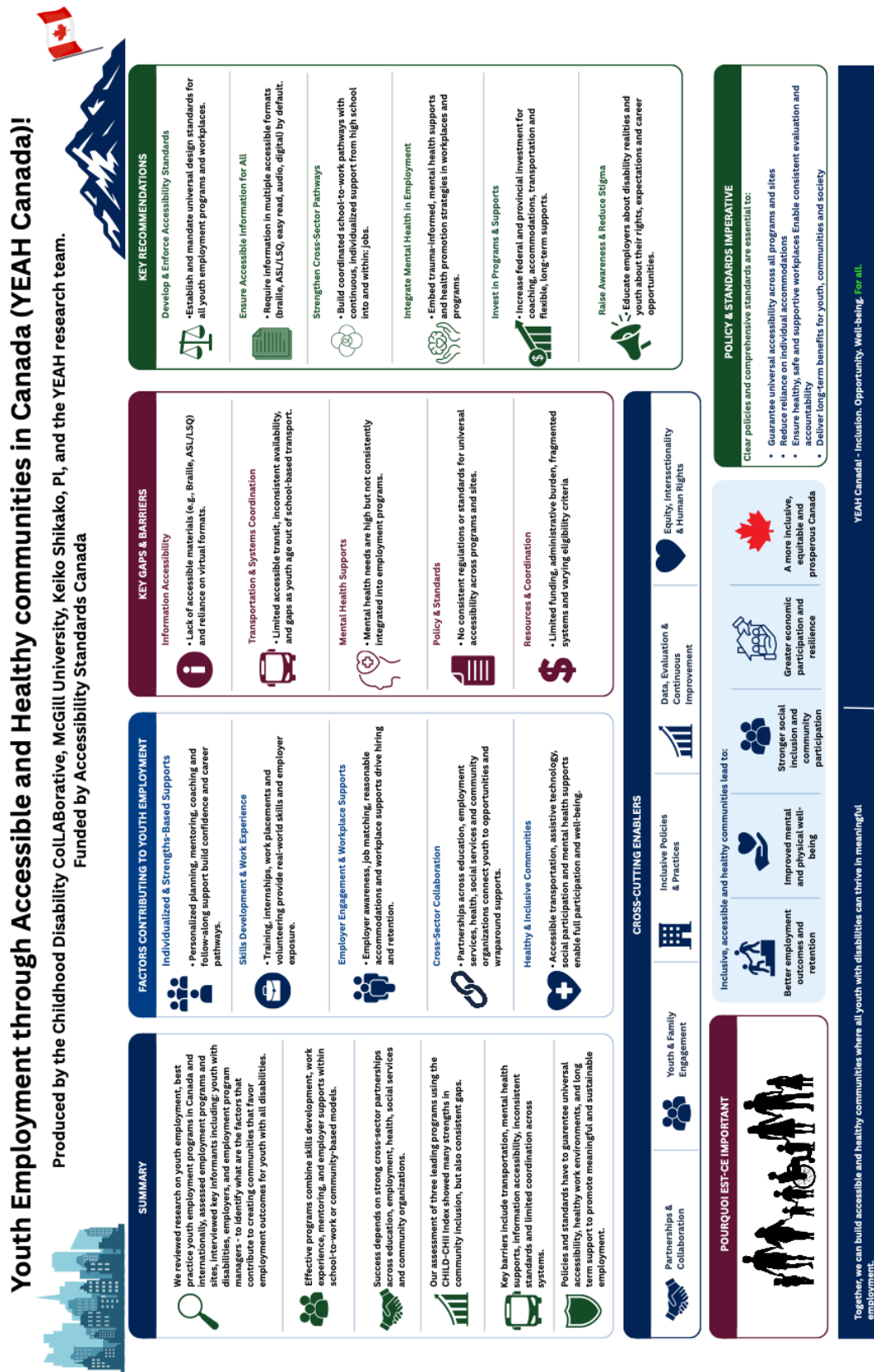
Table 7: Key recommendations for practice, policy, and standards development

Area	Key Recommendation	What This Means in Practice
1. Cross-sector coordination	Build integrated employment pathways instead of isolated programs.	Youth employment programs should connect education, employment, health, mental health, transportation, social services, community organizations, families, and employers.
2. Federal–provincial alignment	Strengthen coordination between federal and provincial systems.	Clarify roles, align funding requirements, reduce administrative burden, and ensure more consistent access to supports across provinces and territories.
3. Universal accessibility	Require all youth employment programs and sites to be accessible across disability groups.	Accessibility should not depend on the main disability group served by a program. Programs should address physical, communication, digital, sensory, cognitive, and mental health accessibility.
4. Plain-language standards	Develop standards that are clear, practical, and easy to use.	Standards should be written in plain language and include examples, tools, and guidance for employers, service providers, youth, and families.
5. Accessible information	Ensure program information is available in multiple accessible formats.	Information should be available in plain language, large print, accessible digital formats, audio, braille where relevant, sign

		language videos or interpretation, and printed formats when needed.
6. School-to-work transitions	Strengthen continuous support from high school into employment and adulthood.	Youth should receive early transition planning, work-based learning, individualized employment goals, family involvement, and links to adult services before school-based supports end.
7. Employer capacity-building	Support employers to create inclusive and accessible workplaces.	Employers need training, guidance, job-matching support, accommodation support, and tools to understand disability realities, workplace rights, and inclusive supervision.
8. Transportation	Treat transportation as a core employment accessibility issue.	Policies and standards should support accessible transit, travel training, transportation subsidies, flexible options in rural and remote areas, and coordination with employment programs.
9. Mental health and trauma-informed supports	Embed mental health supports into employment pathways.	Programs should include trauma-informed practices, stress-reduction strategies, access to mental health services, and coordination between employment and health systems.
10. Long-term supports and retention	Fund supports that go beyond job placement.	Programs should include job coaching, follow-along support, workplace problem-solving, and intensive supports to help youth remain employed over time.
11. Intersectionality	Move from informal awareness to structured intersectional practice.	Programs should address how disability intersects with race, gender, Indigenous identity, language, poverty, immigration status, rurality, mental health, and multiple disabilities.
12. Evaluation and accountability	Require meaningful outcome measurement for publicly funded programs.	Evaluation should include job placement, retention, quality of employment, youth satisfaction, employer satisfaction, accessibility, well-being, social participation, and outcomes across disability groups.
13. Community inclusion	Use a rights-based community inclusion framework to guide program design.	Tools such as the CHILD-CHII can help assess whether communities and program sites support accessibility, inclusion, participation, and employment readiness.
14. Sustainable funding	Provide adequate and stable funding for inclusive youth employment programs.	Funding should support staffing, coaching, accessibility improvements, transportation, mental health supports, employer engagement, evaluation, and long-term follow-up.

15. Accommodation passports and practical tools	Develop tools that make accommodations easier to communicate and implement.	Accommodation passports and similar tools can help youth explain their needs, reduce repeated disclosure, and support smoother transitions across school, training, and employment.
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Figure 1 – YEAH Canada! Infographic summary



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11. Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide

Appendix B: Demographics Forms

Appendix C: Consent forms

Appendix A: Interview Guide

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your time and for signing the consent form and demographic questionnaire.

The reason we are completing this project is due to the lower employment rate of youth with physical disabilities compared to their typically developing peers.

Therefore, the goal of this interview is to get your opinion on the processes, challenges, and facilitators (helping factors) for youth ages 15-30 with disabilities in Canada.

The project aims to contribute to a better understanding of employment experiences of youth with disabilities in Canada.

I know you have reviewed and signed the consent form but just wanted to mention again that what you share is confidential and that your participation is voluntary - you can choose not to answer a particular question or to withdraw from the interview at any time. This interview will be recorded with your consent for qualitative analysis, but again, as mentioned, what you share is confidential. NO information identifying you will be shared. We will send you a summary of the results and will ask for your permission before using any information that may provide any information that can be linked to you.

Do you have any questions?

Questions for Program directors

Note to interviewer: Prompts will only be asked as necessary. The probes (marked with an →) are meant to stimulate discussion.

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about the program, its objectives, scope, the intended population?
2. Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself?

→ Probes:

- What is your role in your organization?
- How long have you been in this/these role(s)?
- What is your experience in helping youth with disabilities seeking employment?

3. What is your experience with the ____ program (specific program in question)?

→ Probes:

- How do youth generally find out about the program?
- In your experience with this program, have you found it helpful for youth with disabilities seeking employment? If so, in what ways? (Examples: building skills, connecting to employers, getting hands-on experience)

- Do you think the ____ Program is reaching all youth who could benefit from it within its scope? If not, what could be done to expand the program? (Locally, Regionally)
 - Would you change anything about the program?
4. Does the program provide volunteer or employment opportunities in the community for youth with disabilities? If yes, how?
 5. Do you remain connected to youth once they are employed? If so, do you find that youth with disabilities generally receive support from their employer or in their workplace?
→ What type of support? Did it correspond to their needs? Is the support provided by the employer or by the program? Have they found this support helpful?
 6. Does the program focus on improving access to education for individuals with disabilities? If yes, how?
 7. Does the program promote opportunities for families to engage in social activities together or for youth with disabilities to connect with others in the community? If yes, how?
→ opportunities to socialise e.g. holiday parties, hockey, wellness initiatives, etc.
 8. Does the program promote leisure opportunities in the community for youth with disabilities?
 9. Does the program offer transportation options from and to the employer's site for youth with disabilities, or put in place support systems to help youth with disabilities at transportation hubs in the community?
 10. Does the program offer opportunities to access healthcare for a physical and/ or a mental health condition? If yes, how?
 11. Does the program seek to raise awareness or positively influence the attitudes of community members toward youth with disabilities? If yes, how?
 12. Does the program offer opportunities in the community for youth with disabilities to access computer technology and technology services? If yes, how?
 13. Does the program make mobile apps or websites listing activities, accessible buildings, accessible routes, or adapted transit available to the community?
 14. Does the program aim to implement/foster accessibility and inclusive policies, regulations and/or initiatives in the community?

15. Do you have any specific considerations on intersectionality?

16. Are you aware of any other programs or training that are helpful for youth with disabilities seeking employment?

→ For those who have experience with another program or training

- In your experience, is ___ program/training helpful for youth? If so, in what ways? (Examples: building skills, connecting to employers, getting hands-on experience)

17. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we talked about today?

Questions for youth

Note to interviewer: Prompts will only be asked as necessary. The probes (marked with an →) are meant to stimulate discussion.

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself? For example, your age, your disability, who you live with, and where you live. Also, what are some of your interests and hobbies?

2. Can you share a bit about your work journey so far?

→ Prompts:

- Are you employed or still looking for a job?
- What do/did you find hard in finding a job? What is/was the most challenging step in finding a job?
- What type of employment are/were you looking for?
- What resource(s) are you using/did you use to find a job? (Examples: job posting websites, personal connections, school contacts, government programs...) Which resource(s) have you found most helpful?
- What skills did you find most helpful to find employment? Examples: social skills (ability to connect and communicate with people), physical skills (ability to typing, mobilize, lift things...), cognitive abilities (ability to think through problems and find solutions, do calculations, excel in a particular school subject...)
- Is there anything else that you found helpful in finding a job?

3. Have you participated in any programs or training that helped you find a job? For example, programs like YTF, RWA, or TEVA?

- How did you find out about ___ program/training?
- How was your experience with the ___ program/training? Was it helpful, and if so, in what ways? (Examples: building skills, connecting to employers, getting hands-on experience)
- Would you change anything about the ___ program?

4. Did your employer or workplace give you any help?
→ What kind of help did you get? Was it what you needed? Did you ask for it, or did they offer it to you? Was the help useful?
5. Did you get any education, training, or coaching through the program? If yes, what kind of help did you get?
6. Did the program give you and your family chances to join social activities and connect with others in the community? If yes, what kind of activities?
→ For example, holiday parties, hockey, wellness programs, or other events.
7. Did the program provide leisure activities in the community for you and other youth with disabilities who joined?
8. Did the program provide transportation to and from your workplace?
9. Did the program help you access healthcare for physical or mental health needs? If yes, how did they help?
10. Did the program help you access computer technology or related services? If yes, how did they help?
11. Did the program give you access to mobile apps or websites that show activities, accessible buildings, routes, or adapted transit options in the community?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share or add to what we talked about today?

Questions for employers

Note to interviewer: Prompts will only be asked as necessary. The probes (marked with an →) are meant to stimulate discussion.

1. Could you share some details about your company and your role there? For example, what sector does the company operate in, and what are your main duties?
2. How would you describe your involvement in the program -----?
→ Prompts: E.g. Employer in partnership with the program, collaboration? Through partner employment agencies?

3. How would you describe your overall experience with the program? Were you able to achieve the employment outcomes you were seeking?
4. How would you describe the experiences of the employees you hired through the program, and do you have any feedback from them?
5. Did you offer any supports in your workplace as a part of the program?
→ What type of support? Did it correspond to the employees' needs? Have they found this support helpful?
6. Were your employees offered any form of education, training, or coaching as part of the program? If so, in what way?
7. Does the program promote opportunities for families to engage in social activities together or for youth with disabilities to connect with others in the community? If yes, how?

→ opportunities to socialise e.g. holiday parties, hockey, wellness initiatives, etc.
8. Do you, as a part of the program, promote leisure opportunities in the community for youth with disabilities?
9. Does the program offer transportation options from and to your site for youth with disabilities, or put in place support systems to help youth with disabilities at transportation hubs in the community?
10. Do you offer opportunities to access healthcare for a physical and/ or a mental health condition as a part of the program? If yes, how?
11. Does the program seek to raise awareness or positively influence the attitudes of community members toward youth with disabilities? If yes, how?
12. Do you offer opportunities in the community for youth with disabilities to access computer technology and technology services as a part of the program? If yes, how?
13. Does the program make mobile apps or websites listing activities, accessible buildings, accessible routes, or adapted transit available to the community?
14. Does the program aim to implement/foster accessibility and inclusive policies, regulations and/or initiatives in the community?

15. Do you have any specific considerations on intersectionality?

16. Are you aware of any other programs or training that are helpful for youth with disabilities seeking employment?

→ For those who have experience with another program or training

- In your experience, is __ program/training helpful for youth? If so, in what ways? (Examples: building skills, connecting to employers, getting hands-on experience)

17. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we talked about today?

Appendix B: Demographic Forms

Information about you and your identity (demographic form)

Brief Demographic Form

Please answer the following questions in the spaces provided. Circle or tick the most appropriate options. Please note: (1) this information is strictly private and confidential, (2) we are gathering this information to know who participated in the interviews, (3) your name will not be associated with this information, and (4) results will be written up in aggregate/summary form (For example: 80% of the participants were working for pay part-time) and your name will not appear anywhere.

Your Demographic information

Year of birth:

1. Gender: (Please select your choice with an X).

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Other. Please specify:
- ☐ Prefer not to say

2. Types of Disability (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Intellectual
- ☐ Physical
- ☐ Autism Spectrum Disorder
- ☐ Visual
- ☐ Deaf or Hard-of-hearing
- ☐ Behavioral/Mental health
- ☐ Other: Please specify

3. Registered in a specialized school? (Please put X in front of your choice).

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ N/A

4. Followed at a rehabilitation centre? (Please put X in front of your choice).

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ N/A

Principal Investigator Responsible for the Study:

Dr. Keiko Shikako, Associate Professor
School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, McGill University

Demographic Form (Other stakeholders)

Please answer the following questions in the spaces provided. Please note the following:

- (i) the information you provide is strictly confidential and will be recorded as anonymous.
- (ii) we are collecting this information so we have a sense of who participated in the interviews.
- (iii) results will be collated in aggregate/percentage form (For example: 80% of the participants were working for pay part-time).

Please fill in the demographic information. Select your choice with an X:

1. Year of birth:

2. Gender:

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Other. Please specify:
- ☐ Prefer not to say

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ Some High School Education
- ☐ High School Diploma
- ☐ Post-Secondary/Professional Degree (Not University)
- ☐ University Degree (Bachelor's degree)
- ☐ Post-Graduate Degree (Master's degree or higher)

4. Which of the following income categories do you fall under, before taxes and deductions?

- ☐ Less than \$20,000
- ☐ \$20,001 to \$40,000
- ☐ \$40,001 to \$60,000
- ☐ \$60,001 to \$80,000
- ☐ More than \$80,001

5. Postal code of your place of residence (first 3 digits):

6. Please specify your community type: (Please put X in front of your choice).

- ☐ Small population centre (1,001 - 29,999 inhabitants)
- ☐ Medium population centre (30,000 - 99,999 inhabitants)
- ☐ Large population centre (over 100,000 inhabitants)
- ☐ Rural

Principal Investigator Responsible for the Study:

Dr. Keiko Shikako, Associate Professor,

School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, McGill University.

Appendix C: Consent Forms



RESEARCH INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM – YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Research Study Title:	Youth Employment Accessibility through Health and inclusive communities (YEAH)
Researcher Responsible for the Study:	Dr. Keiko Shikako, OT, PhD Canada Research Chair in Childhood Disabilities School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, McGill University
Co-Investigators:	Mehrnoosh Movahed, MD, PhD, McGill University Roberta Cardoso PhD, McGill University Paul YOO, PhD, OT, Sick Kids Research Institute
Funding Source:	Accessibility Standards Canada, Government of Canada

Introduction

We invite you to join this research project. Before you decide, please take some time to read and understand the information below and sign the consent form. The form explains the purpose of the study, what will happen, the benefits and risks, and who to contact if you have questions.

This form may contain words that you do not understand. We invite you to speak to the researchers responsible for this project if you have any questions or if any parts of this consent form are not clear to you.

Background

Persons with disability in Canada experience systemic barriers to full participation in society, such as unequal participation in the labour force, workplace, and education, social services and support needs. The transition from school to post-school employment can be particularly challenging for youth with disabilities. In 2019, youth with disabilities ages 15 to 24 in Canada had an employment rate of 55%. The rate dropped to 39% in July 2020, following the pandemic.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Identify the best ways (like programs, policies, and standards) to help youth with disabilities move from school to work and find jobs.
2. Understand which community factors (such as policies, services, and programs) help or make it harder for youth with disabilities to get jobs.

Description of the Project

We will talk to the following people:

1. Youth with disabilities and caregivers of children and youth with disabilities who took part in school-to-work transition and employment programs identified in our study, as well as their employers.
2. Program directors and managers at places like schools and rehabilitation centers.

If you agree to join this project, we will ask you questions about:

1. The employment or school-to-work program you participated in and your experience with it.
2. How some community factors (like rules, services, and programs) are included in this program.

We will conduct a one-on-one interview with you remotely using your preferred communication method (phone, internet, or other platforms). You can choose to have the interview in English or French. If needed, we will provide disability accommodations such as sign language interpretation, captioning, large print, plain language, or other supports.

The interview will last about 60 to 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded and written out later. A member of our research team will lead the interview and take notes.

After the interview, we will ask you to fill out a short demographic form with 7 questions (about your age, gender, types of disabilities, education level, work status, etc.). Completing the form should take no more than 5 minutes.

After removing your name and your organization's name, we will review the information you share and create a report for Accessibility Standards Canada. This report may help improve federal accessibility rules for youth employment. The information will also be used for research and to create simple materials like posters and videos to share with the community.

Benefits

You won't receive any major personal benefits from participating in this interview. However, your contribution will benefit the broader disability community by helping to improve employment opportunities for youth with disabilities in Canada.

Risks

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.

Voluntary Participation and the Right to Withdraw

Taking part in this study is your choice. You can say no to joining, and you can stop at any time without giving a reason. If you decide to stop, just let a member of the research team know. You can also ask us to remove your information from the study. Unless you ask us to delete it, we will keep and use the information we collected. However, if we've already used your information in our analysis, that part can't be undone.

Confidentiality

All the information collected during the research project will be kept private and confidential. All audio-recordings will be transcribed (your words will be written down) in a de-identified fashion. We will do this by taking out the names of organizations and participants from the transcripts and replacing them with random number codes. These codes will not be connected to any personal information, so everyone stays anonymous. Audiotapes and typed notes will be safely kept in a password-protected files for 7 years. Only people on this research team (whose names are listed above) will have access to it. It is possible that direct quotes of what you said will be presented in publications and/or conferences. However, the research team will make sure that if your quote is used, no-one will know that it was you who said those words.

For auditing purposes, the research study files could be looked at by the institution (McGill University), or the Research Ethics Board. These files could include information that may identify your name or other private information. All the people who work for McGill University or the Research Ethics Board have to follow policies and rules to keep this information private and confidential.

Compensation

People who participate in an interview for this research will be given \$100 as an honorarium.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or problems about your participation in this study, or if you would like to withdraw, please contact Dr. Roberta Cardoso, a research team member, at roberta.cardoso@muhc.mcgill.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, and want to speak with someone not on the research team, please contact the Research Ethics Board Office, daniel.tesolin@mcgill.ca or 514-398-5410, citing REB file number A00-M60-24A (24-08-022).

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, have any comments, or want to make a complaint, you can contact Ms. Ilde Lepore, Ethics Officer at McGill University Faculty of Medicine, at 514-398-8302 or ilde.lepore@mcgill.ca.

Consent (Your agreement to participate in this research project)

Title of this research project: Mapping accessible employment pathways for youth with disabilities: National and International best-practices

I understand all the information in this form. I understand what this research project is about, and how I can participate. I have had a chance to ask all my questions about this research project. I agree to participate in this research project

☐ I consent to participate in this research study.

Do you give us permission to audio-record your interview and store the recordings with your research data? We will do our best to keep all information collected during the interview confidential.

☐ Yes, I do

☐ No, I do not

Do you agree to allow the researchers to use the information collected for research purposes, including publications and materials like posters and videos?

☐ Yes, I do

☐ No, I do not

If you agree to participate in this research project, you are not giving up your legal rights. The sponsor or the institution still has their legal or professional responsibilities if you are harmed in any way.

Name of adult participant
(Print)

Signature

Date

Name of the parent giving consent
(Print)

Signature

Date

I have explained to the participant and/or his parent/legal guardian all the relevant aspects of this study. I answered any questions they asked. I explained that participation in a research project is free and voluntary and that they are free to stop participating at any time they choose.

Name of Person obtaining consent
(Print)

(signature)

Date



RESEARCH INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM – EMPLOYERS

Research Study Title:	Youth Employment Accessibility through Health and inclusive communities (YEAH)
Researcher Responsible for the Study:	Dr. Keiko Shikako, OT, PhD Canada Research Chair in Childhood Disabilities School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, McGill University
Co-Investigators:	Mehrnoosh Movahed, MD, PhD, McGill University Roberta Cardoso PhD, McGill University Paul Yoo, PhD, OT, Sick Kids Research Institute
Funding Source:	Accessibility Standards Canada, Government of Canada

Introduction

We are inviting you to take part in this research project. Before you agree to take part, please take the time to read and understand the following information and sign the consent form. This consent form explains the purpose of this study, the procedures, advantages, and risks, as well as the persons to contact, if necessary.

This form may contain words that you do not understand. We invite you to speak to the researchers responsible for this project if you have any questions or if any parts of this consent form are not clear to you.

Background

Persons with disability in Canada experience systemic barriers to full participation in society, such as unequal participation in the labour force, workplace, and education, social services and support needs. The transition from school to post-school employment can be particularly challenging for youth with disabilities. In 2019, youth with disabilities ages 15 to 24 in Canada had an employment rate of 55%. The rate dropped to 39% in July 2020, following the pandemic.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Identify best practices for school-to-work transitions (e.g., programs, policies, standards) that can support access to employment for youth with disabilities.
2. Evaluate the factors in the communities (policies, services, and programs) that support or hinder pathways to employment for youth with disabilities.

Description of the Project

We will conduct interviews with the following participants:

1. Youth with disabilities and/or caregivers of children and youth with disabilities who took part in school-to-work transition and employment programs identified in our study, along with their employers.
2. Program directors and managers at various implementation sites, such as schools and rehabilitation centers.

If you agree to participate in this project, you will be invited to respond to questions about:

- 1- The employment or school-to-work transition program your organisation is involved in, including its objectives, scope, and intended audience.
- 2- To assess how specific community factors (including policies, services, and programs) are incorporated into your implementation of this employment program.

We will use your preferred method of communication to conduct a remote individual interview (by phone/internet or alternative communication platforms). Interviews will be in English or French, as you prefer. Disability accommodations such as sign language communication, captioning, large print, plain language and others will be provided upon request.

Interviews will take 60 to 90 minutes and be audio-recorded and transcribed. A research team member will conduct the interviews and take notes. Following the interview, we will send you a demographic form (7 questions including age, gender, types of disabilities (if any), level of education, work status, etc.). This form will take no more than 5 minutes to complete.

After removing your name and your organization's name, the information you share will be analyzed and included in a report for Accessibility Standards Canada. This report could help guide the development of federal accessibility standards for youth employment. The de-identified information will also be used for academic articles and materials designed to share knowledge with the community, such as infographics and informational videos.

As a participant of this research study, you will have the option to review the transcript of your interview to ensure accuracy and clarify your responses before the final version is used in the study.

Benefits

You will not receive any major direct benefits for participating in this interview. However, the disability community at large will benefit because of your contribution, given that your decisions will help to advance the employment of youth with disabilities in Canada.

Risks

There are no expected risks associated with taking part in this research project.

Voluntary Participation and the Right to Withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary, therefore, you may refuse to participate. You may also

withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, by informing a member of the research team. If you withdraw from the study, you may also request that the research team remove your data from the study. Your data will be kept and used unless you specifically ask us to destroy it. In that case, any analysis already done using the data will be kept.

Confidentiality

All the information collected during the research project will be kept confidential. Any audio recordings will be transcribed, meaning your words will be written down, without including names or identifiable details. Names of organizations and participants will be replaced with randomly assigned numerical codes that cannot be traced back to you, ensuring your anonymity. The audiotapes and typed notes will be stored safely in password-protected files for a period of 7 years following the end of the study, after which it will be destroyed. Only the members of the research team listed above will have access to it. It is possible that direct quotes of what you said will be presented in publications and/or conferences. However, all considerations will be taken to ensure that it will not be possible to identify you.

For auditing purposes, the research study files which could include documents that may identify you may be examined by the institution, or the Research Ethics Board. However, all these individuals and organizations adhere to policies on confidentiality.

Compensation

Participants will be offered \$100 compensation for their participation.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or if you have a problem you think may be related to your participation in this research study or if you would like to withdraw, you may communicate with Dr. Roberta Cardoso, a research team member, at roberta.cardoso@muhc.mcgill.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, and want to speak with someone not on the research team, please contact the Research Ethics Board Office, daniel.tesolin@mcgill.ca or 514-398-5410, citing REB file number A00-M60-24A (24-08-022).

For any question concerning your rights as a research participant taking part in this study or if you have comments, or wish to file a complaint, you may communicate with Ms. Ilde Lepore, Ethics Officer at McGill University Faculty of Medicine, at 514-398-8302 or ilde.lepore@mcgill.ca.

Consent

Title of this research project: Mapping accessible employment pathways for youth with disabilities: National and International best-practices

I declare that I have read the consent form and understood this project. I have had the opportunity

to ask all my questions regarding the different aspects of the study and to receive answers to those questions.

☐ I consent to participate in this research study.

Do you authorize us to audio-record your interview and store the recordings with your research data? We will make every effort to ensure that all information collected during the interview remains confidential.

☐ Yes, I do

☐ No, I do not

Do you agree to allow the researchers to use the information collected for research purposes, including academic publications and knowledge translation materials such as infographics and informational videos?

☐ Yes, I do

☐ No, I do not

In no way does consenting to participate in this research study waive your legal rights nor release the sponsor or the institution from their legal or professional responsibilities if you are harmed in any way.

Name of adult participant
(Print)

Signature

Date

I have explained to the participant and/or his parent/legal guardian all the relevant aspects of this study. I answered any questions they asked. I explained that participation in a research project is free and voluntary and that they are free to stop participating at any time they choose.

Name of Person obtaining consent
(Print)

(signature)

Date



RESEARCH INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM – PROGRAM DIRECTORS

Research Study Title:	Youth Employment Accessibility through Health and inclusive communities (YEAH)
Researcher Responsible for the Study:	Dr. Keiko Shikako, OT, PhD Canada Research Chair in Childhood Disabilities School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, McGill University
Co-Investigators:	Mehrnoosh Movahed, MD, PhD, McGill University Roberta Cardoso PhD, McGill University Paul YOO, PhD, OT, Sick Kids Research Institute
Funding Source:	Accessibility Standards Canada, Government of Canada

Introduction

We are inviting you to take part in this research project. Before you agree to take part, please take the time to read and understand the following information and sign the consent form. This consent form explains the purpose of this study, the procedures, advantages, and risks, as well as the persons to contact, if necessary.

This form may contain words that you do not understand. We invite you to speak to the researchers responsible for this project if you have any questions or if any parts of this consent form are not clear to you.

Background

Persons with disability in Canada experience systemic barriers to full participation in society, such as unequal participation in the labour force, workplace, and education, social services and support needs. The transition from school to post-school employment can be particularly challenging for youth with disabilities. In 2019, youth with disabilities ages 15 to 24 in Canada had an employment rate of 55%. The rate dropped to 39% in July 2020, following the pandemic.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to:

3. Identify best practices for school-to-work transitions (e.g., programs, policies, standards) that can support access to employment for youth with disabilities.
4. Evaluate the factors in the communities (policies, services, and programs) that support or hinder pathways to employment for youth with disabilities.

Description of the Project

We will conduct interviews with the following participants:

3. Youth with disabilities and/or caregivers of children and youth with disabilities who took part in school-to-work transition and employment programs identified in our study, along with their employers.
4. Program directors and managers at various implementation sites, such as schools and rehabilitation centers.

If you agree to participate in this project, you will be invited to respond to questions about:

- 3- The employment or school-to-work transition program you oversee or manage, along with its objectives, scope, and intended audience.
- 4- To evaluate how specific community factors (including policies, services, and programs) are considered in the employment program you oversee and how they contribute to its success.

We will use your preferred method of communication to conduct a remote individual interview (by phone/internet or alternative communication platforms). Interviews will be in English or French, as you prefer. Disability accommodations such as sign language communication, captioning, large print, plain language and others will be provided upon request.

Interviews will take 60 to 90 minutes and be audio-recorded and transcribed. A research team member will conduct the interviews and take notes. Following the interview, we will send you a demographic form (7 questions including age, gender, types of disabilities (if any), level of education, work status, etc.). This form will take no more than 5 minutes to complete.

After removing your name and your organization's name, the information you share will be analyzed and included in a report for Accessibility Standards Canada. This report could help guide the development of federal accessibility standards for youth employment. The de-identified information will also be used for academic articles and materials designed to share knowledge with the community, such as infographics and informational videos.

As a participant of this research study, you will have the option to review the transcript of your interview to ensure accuracy and clarify your responses before the final version is used in the study.

Benefits

You will not receive any major direct benefits for participating in this interview. However, the disability community at large will benefit because of your contribution, given that your decisions will help to advance the employment of youth with disabilities in Canada.

Risks

There are no expected risks associated with taking part in this research project.

Voluntary Participation and the Right to Withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary, therefore, you may refuse to participate. You may also withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, by informing a member of the research team. If you withdraw from the study, you may also request that the research team remove your data from the study. Your data will be kept and used unless you specifically ask us to destroy it. In that case, any analysis already done using the data will be kept.

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