

Readiness of Special Education Teachers in the Implementation of a Career Transition Programme for Students with Special Educational Needs in Malaysian Island Schools

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Abstract

The educational framework catering to students with special educational needs should prioritise the development of skills and knowledge that adequately equip them for successful integration into the workforce. The extent to which the education system provides job experiences and skills to students determines their employability after completing their school life. The purpose of this study is to investigate the level of knowledge and abilities of special education teachers in executing the Career Transition Program (CTP) in Malaysian schools on islands. A case study research design is used in this qualitative study. Purposive sampling strategies were used for sampling. This study included six special education teachers from three different island schools as participants. Data was gathered through interviews and field observations. The data was analyzed descriptively in NVivo 14 and presented in narrative form. The study's findings indicate that teachers' knowledge and skills in providing job transition training in schools are rather limited. However, educators exhibit positive attitude in order to facilitate the successful execution of the CTP within educational institutions. Therefore, it is imperative to provide thorough in-service training to special education instructors in order to augment their knowledge and skills in effectively administering the CTP. This study also suggests the need for policies and practices that enhance the effectiveness of the CTP, with the aim of establishing a comprehensive education system and promoting the growth of students with special educational needs that can compete globally.

Keywords: Career Transition Programme, Island Schools, Special Needs Students, Special Education, Teachers' readiness

Introduction

The biggest challenge faced by students with special educational needs is dealing with employment issues after completing their education. According to the World Health Organization (2011), having a job is an opportunity to reduce social isolation and a means to

overcome poverty among persons with disabilities. Employment is associated with self-confidence, self-esteem, community status, and economic well-being (Noland & Gleeson, 2017; Wehman et al., 2018). Two factors to address the issue of poverty are education and employment (Groh-Samberg & Voges, 2014). Limited employment opportunities and competition with other typical youths make it difficult for special educational needs students to own a career after graduation. Thus, the Career Transition Programme (CTP) is crucial to provide career experiences for students with special educational needs as preparation for entering the workforce after completing their schooling. Malaysian government aims for at least 1% of persons with disabilities to be involved in the workforce, but this goal has not been achieved yet. To achieve this goal, students with special educational needs should be provided with knowledge, industry related skills and realities of the real workplace (Chadderton, 2020).

Thus, early preparation programme should be implemented by considering job opportunities, interests, and an individual's abilities, enabling them to produce quality work. Executive functions are critical to support learning for individuals with disabilities (Khairuddin et al., 2020; Norok & Khairuddin, 2019). However, the career skills taught in schools in this country are still at a lower level compared to the skills required in the industry. Abdul Wahab and Alias (2017) state that there is a gap in industry-related skills compared to the skills taught in schools. This situation occurs because special education teachers implement the CTP only based on their existing knowledge and skills, without involving collaboration with the industry.

Transition training for careers requires systematic planning that includes skills development, job experience acquisition, vocational training, community services, and independent living skills (Bernaldez, 2015; Kohler, 2016). The increasing unemployment rates among persons with disabilities in Malaysia emphasizes the need for knowledgeable and highly skilled teachers who can deliver vocational skills and provide real work experiences to students with special educational needs, thus addressing the issue of unemployment promptly. Most schools in rural areas face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified special education teachers with knowledge in transition competencies (Brownell et al., 2018).

Teachers serving in rural areas also struggle to access in-service training regarding the implementation of CTP compared to special education teachers in urban areas (Peltola et al., 2017). Most teachers also do not receive training on career transition education during the pre-service stage (Williams-Diehm et al., 2018). Therefore, in-service professional development training is crucial to enhance teachers' knowledge about the curriculum content of transition programs (Doren et al., 2013; Flannery et al., 2015). Teachers also express dissatisfaction with the level of their in-service training regarding career transition (Plotner et al., 2016; Morningstar et al., 2018). They need to acquire their own knowledge to implement CTP based on the curriculum content of other special education programme (Deardorff et al., 2021). Therefore, the rationale for conducting this study is to explore the readiness of teachers in terms of knowledge and skills in implementing the CTP in island schools.

Transition Competencies of Special Education Teacher

Career transition training is needed to provide information about the realities of the job market (Chadderton, 2020) so that early preparation can be made, taking into account job

opportunities, interests, and individuals' abilities to enable them to produce quality work. Thus, teachers' knowledge about career transitions is crucial for the preparation of an effective Career Transition Programme that fosters the success of individuals with disabilities after completing their schooling (Morningstar & Mazzotti, 2014; Test et al., 2009). Special education teachers with high competency in terms of knowledge and skills can ensure that the curriculum content can be effectively delivered. However, past studies have found that special education teachers in suburban area schools lack of in-depth knowledge and skills in implementing transition training methods for the students with special educational needs. This is due to the fact that most teachers do not receive career transition-related courses during their pre-service teacher preparation programme (Williams-Diehm et al., 2018, Morningstar et al., 2018; Plotner et al., 2016). Previous studies also found that teachers were not given the opportunity to access professionalism development training in their service. Thus, majority of them are unable to design quality and compliant transition programme such as writing student's IEPs, implementing career transition programs in schools, and teaching job skills (Morningstar et al., 2018).

One important aspect of implementing transition programme is a curriculum based on vocational education (Landmark et al., 2010; Cobb & Alwell, 2009; Test et al., 2009; and Zhang et al., 2005). According to the Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler, 2016), students' transition to careers involves five main aspects; student-centered planning, student development, family involvement, programme's structure, and collaborative interaction. These aspects are main factors of the success of CTP as these require the involvement of all parties, not only teachers and students but also parents, external agencies, and employers. They work together to support individuals with disabilities in acquiring career skills and work experience during their high school years.

Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative approach, specifically employing a case study design to investigate the readiness of special education teachers in terms of their knowledge and skills in implementing the CTP for students with special educational needs in schools located in the island area of Malaysia. The researcher employed a purposeful sampling technique to choose participants that meet the predetermined criteria. The study sample comprises six special education teachers who are responsible for administering the CTP at the Special Education Integration Programme (PPKI). The present study was carried out at three secondary schools situated on island regions, employing interview and observation techniques as the primary means of data collection.

The research instrument comprises semi-structured interview protocols that have been devised by the researcher and adapted from prior investigations. The interview protocols underwent a rigorous review process by two specialists who possess extensive experience as job transition teachers, in order to ascertain the research instrument's validity. A pilot study was undertaken to examine the implementation of career transition training by a special education teacher within a school setting. The collection of data in this study was conducted using a combination of interviews and field observations within the designated study region. The data was analysed descriptively with NVivo 14 software, and the findings were presented narratively.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants, who are teachers working in the field of special education.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Respondents

Respondent	Age (years)	Sex	Academic Qualification	Teaching Experience (years)
Nadia	31	F	Bachelor of Education (Special Education)	3
Khairi	31	M	Bachelor of Education (Special Education)	5
Hidayati	37	F	Bachelor Degree in Vocational Education	10
Azliza	34	F	Bachelor of Education (Special Education)	9
Masni	34	F	Bachelor of Education (Special Education)	5
William	31	M	Bachelor of Education (Special Education)	7

Empowerment of Special Education Teachers Through Professional Development

One of the main methods for acquiring knowledge on competencies related to career transition training is by participating in professionalism courses or engaging in knowledge exchange with colleagues. This is particularly important in relation to career transition approaches and practices, as highlighted by (Pham, 2012; Plotner et al., 2016). Nevertheless, this is a formidable obstacle for educators in rural regions who face a dearth of resources compared to their colleagues in urban area. The importance of teacher training cannot be overstated when it comes to efficiently providing curricular knowledge and skills to students with special educational needs, hence empowering them in a certain skill domain.

Pre-Service Teacher Training

Regarding teacher training, study findings suggest that teacher in island school seldom or never participate in courses and training specifically designed for the CTP facilitated by the appropriate authorities. All participants stated that they did not receive sufficient exposure to the CTP during their pre-service training. Indeed, the provision of information regarding the transition training was just initiated upon the commencement of their service in educational institutions. Here Azliza and Khairi state:

"I never heard about Career Transition Programme during my study at university. I only found out about it when I started my posting. That was the first time I heard about the programme." (Azliza)

"I was never taught about Career Transition Programme during my teacher training course." (Khairi)

Teachers perceive that their constrained knowledge and competencies pertaining to career transition stem from the dearth of training provided during the pre-service phase.

In-Service Teacher Training

Teachers did not receive training in career transition competencies during their service. In-service training refers to the professional development opportunities that teachers engage in while actively serving in their roles. The research findings indicate that majority of respondents in the study possessed teaching experience over five years. However, it was observed that these individuals seldom or never participated in professional development courses pertaining to career transitions during their service. This suggests that there is a lack of implementation of courses and training workshops pertaining to career transition information for special education teachers, particularly in suburban areas such as island regions. The research findings indicate that two participants were summoned to partake in a training, however on a singular occasion. Subsequently, they refrained from enrolling in any courses pertaining to the process of transitioning careers. Special education teachers have reported that they receive inadequate training in relation to the CTP throughout their service. The lack of clarity among special education teachers regarding the optimal approaches and practices required to strengthen the CTP in schools has been observed.

"After started my first posting, I received a letter to attend a course about Career Transition Programme. Just once.. After that, there were no more courses conducted for teachers to obtain information about the implementation of Career Transition Programme." (Khairi)

Teachers assert that their exposure to the implementation of career transitions during their tenure is restricted. Training and courses are exclusively offered to teachers who have been assigned as District Master Trainers, assuming the role of knowledge disseminators to fellow teachers within their particular districts. It is incumbent upon these educators to effectively disseminate the most up-to-date knowledge and methods pertaining to the implementation of the CTP to their colleagues within their respective districts. The exchange of information is of utmost importance in ensuring that all educators possess the necessary knowledge and expertise to effectively administer career transition training across educational institutions. However, educators demonstrate self-sufficiency by frequently taking the lead in improving their understanding and abilities in relation to professional advancement. This encompasses engaging in educational courses and workshops, utilizing online resources, engaging in extensive reading, and actively participating in knowledge sharing with fellow educators.

Best Practices in Implementation of Career Transition Programme

The findings indicate that three effective strategies have been employed in the implementation of the Career Transition Programme by special education instructors, addressing the second research question pertaining to their approach.

i. Mastery of Specific Vocational Skills

According to Petersen (2016); Saimi (2019), it has been observed that students with special educational needs have been excluded from the regular curriculum and it is recommended that they be provided with vocational skills training to facilitate their integration into society through employment. The inclusion of Specific Vocational Skills

courses embedded in the Special Education Secondary School Standard Curriculum offers students with special educational needs the chance to develop comprehensive expertise and abilities in a specific occupational domain, thus equipping them for future employment. Specific Vocational Skills, which are initially introduced to form two students encompass a range of disciplines including Food Preparation and Production, Baking, Pastry Making, Horticulture, Agriculture, and Furniture Making. The selection of subjects is contingent upon the individual students' interests and aptitudes. Obtaining a Malaysian Skills Certificate within a selected vocational college offers notable benefits to students with special needs due to its potential to enhance their employability prospects in their preferred vocational domain (Ibrahim et al., 2021). The Skills Development Department bestows the Malaysian Skills Certificate recognition as a means of assisting young individuals in obtaining work opportunities. In order to facilitate the optimal development of students with special needs, it is imperative for educators to equip themselves with comprehensive knowledge and abilities pertaining to Specific Vocational Skills courses.

The research findings suggest that none of the study participants has the Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) required for teaching Specific Vocational Skills courses to students. This assertion is substantiated by the research conducted by Azahari et al (2022), wherein it was discovered that a significant number of special education teachers lack the necessary qualifications and certifications to effectively instruct the students with special educational needs in vocational skills. The importance of incorporating skills courses, such as the Malaysian Skills Certificate, into the professional development of teachers should be duly recognized in order to optimize the efficacy of teaching and learning in Specific Vocational Skills disciplines. Nevertheless, due to the restricted availability of complimentary courses offered by the Department of Skills Development and Ministry of Education, educators are compelled to allocate both their resources and finances in order to pursue the courses.

Besides financial constraints, time limitations also serve as a hindrance for teachers' engagement in certification programme across diverse skill domains. In addition, the escalating workload faced by educators in educational institutions, along with the problem of a dearth of specialized teachers in the field of special education, provide challenges for teachers aspiring to engage in professional development programme (Flores, 2008). Consequently, a significant proportion of special education teachers continue to lack specialized knowledge and skills in the area of vocational instruction, thereby impeding their effectiveness in teaching vocational skills. The presence of insufficiently skilled teachers in certain subject areas presents difficulties in evaluating students and has a detrimental effect on student performance (Morningstar et al., 2018).

The successful execution of the CTP necessitates a methodical approach in order to effectively contribute to the advancement of students with special educational needs. According to Abdul Wahab and Aliza (2017), it is crucial for teachers to have a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the CTP. This understanding should encompass fundamental elements and programme policies, as well as the ability to develop career transition plans, evaluate students' interests and capabilities, and establish partnerships with industries that may offer employment opportunities to students during their career transition training. The integration of academic curriculum and occupational skills teaching within the

execution of CTP in educational institutions can offer a comprehensive learning approach that combines theoretical knowledge with practical job-related applications.

ii. Student-Centered Planning

The utilization of this strategy enhances the efficacy of career transition training by allowing teachers to deliver targeted counsel to students according to their functional levels (Morningstar et al., 2015). This aspect is of utmost importance given the varying capabilities exhibited by students with special educational needs. Therefore, the incorporation of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) into job transition initiatives guarantees that students are provided with tailored education or relevant services that are specifically designed to meet their individual needs. IEP is a written document that contains the services and support needed by an individual with special needs to ensure that this group receives a complete education (Goldman & Mason 2018). The IEP assists educators in developing suitable and legally compatible transition plans, which facilitate the provision of appropriate transition services and instructions (Ruble et al., 2021). The determination of professional goals for students with special needs involves an assessment of their preferences, interests, talents, and abilities. According to research findings, educators strategically design students' career transition training by utilizing Individualized Education Program (IEPs) as a foundation. This approach prioritizes the development of skills that are pertinent to occupations that correspond with students' unique talents and abilities. Furthermore, the IEP facilitates students in developing vocational awareness by fostering an understanding of their aptitudes and limitations, personal interests, and core beliefs. This comprehensive understanding empowers students to make informed decisions pertaining to their chosen career paths (Tideman et al., 2022).

During vocational learning sessions, educators place significant emphasis on practical training, which comprises 70% of the instructional time, while theoretical instruction accounts for just 30% of the learning sessions. The inclusion of practical training in educational curriculum facilitates the acquisition of skills by students, as they are able to develop a comprehensive understanding through firsthand experiences. Furthermore, the comprehension of the correlation between theoretical concepts and their practical application in daily life serves to bolster students' willingness to actively engage in the fulfillment of prescribed activities (Santangelo & Tomasetto, 2018). Students also cultivate self-reliance and self-advocacy skills through experiential learning, wherein educators facilitate their own pursuit of information in order to fulfill assigned responsibilities. In the context of studying Food Preparation and Cooking, students are required to attain a high level of proficiency in various areas, such as equipment utilization, recipe comprehension, and ingredient selection, in order to successfully produce a predetermined menu. Preparation of career experience is also acquired through vocational skills learning sessions and career transition activities conducted at the school level, such as food preparation activities, food packaging, craft production, and other activities. If students are solely provided with the opportunity to acquire theoretical knowledge, their ability to properly acquire fundamental cooking skills will be limited. The comprehension of the theory presented in the classroom can be enhanced by the implementation of practical activities, wherein students are tasked with independent completion of assignments, while the teacher assumes the role of a facilitator, offering guidance and moral encouragement to the students. According to Lindsay

et al. (2018), the acquisition of practical skills through experiential training enhances students' readiness for autonomous life following the completion of their educational pursuits.

iii. Collaboration Between Teachers with Parents and Industry

The successful execution of career transition training necessitates the active cooperation and involvement of several stakeholders, encompassing educators, parents, and industry representatives. Collaborative services encompass the provision of assistance by many entities to facilitate the effective execution of the CTP under the Special Education Integration Programme. These services aim to prepare students for their transition into the workforce (Abdullah, 2017). Previous research has indicated that educators had an understanding of the significance of establishing partnerships with students, parents, the community, and external organizations in order to attain efficacy in the CTP (Kohler et al., 2016). The extent to which educators possess knowledge and comprehension regarding the execution of the CTP is contingent upon their capacity to effectively engage in communication with various individuals, including special education teachers, students with special needs, parents, families, and other stakeholders (Clark, 2007; Rowe et al., 2015). In order to provide comprehensive and practical job transition training programme for students with special needs, educators require the active involvement and support of parents. This collaboration entails engaging in meaningful dialogues to ascertain the specific interests, abilities, and strengths of these individuals. In conjunction with parental support, educators also necessitate assistance from the industry in facilitating transitional training placements, offering advise on technical proficiencies and employability in various professions, fostering the development of interpersonal skills, and instilling practical work ethics during industrial training.

The findings from this study indicate that educators engaged in collaborative efforts with both parents and industry professionals in order to seek suitable placement for facilitating transition training. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a significant majority of institutions, specifically two-thirds, have not yet forged partnerships with external agencies in order to ensure placements for students throughout their industrial training. This is due to the considerable distance between the student's place and the school, which is located far from the town. However, it is anticipated that educators would arrange for students to participate in industrial training programs in the forthcoming period. Significant professional experiences are acquired by the active participation of students in industry training. Hence, it is imperative for special education teachers to possess extensive knowledge and proficiency in establishing partnerships with external organizations in order to guarantee the effective execution of the CTP at an industrial scale.

The establishment of a collaborative relationship between educators and the industry is of utmost importance in order to ensure that teacher training is in line with the demands of the actual job market (Mazzotti et al., 2016). By means of collaborative knowledge exchange, educators and professionals in the field can engage in a dialogue regarding the prevailing labor market and the potential for students with special needs to secure employment, as determined by evaluations completed during their transitional training. This facilitates the implementation of transition activities aimed at fostering the professional potential of students. According to research findings, a number of educational institutions have established partnerships with the industry to facilitate student placements in various

sectors, including hotels, resorts, and restaurants, particularly in island regions. These opportunities should not be squandered as they not only provide valuable job experience in authentic work settings, but also facilitate the cultivation of soft skills that can enhance students' readiness to confront professional obstacles.

Nevertheless, the research findings also unveiled that certain educational institutions exhibit reluctance in forming partnerships with the industry. This hesitancy stems from a multitude of constraints, including challenges associated with the preparedness of both teachers and students, scarcity of educators within the Special Education Integration Programme, and apprehensions expressed by parents. There exists a notable disparity between academic knowledge and its actual implementation within real-world work settings (Alias, 2015). Consequently, it is imperative for special education teachers to guarantee that students with special needs are provided with the chance to engage in career training (Tarver, 2004) within authentic work environments, in order to adequately prepare them for genuine job encounters. According to Carlson (2022), the integration of real work environments in a community facilitates students in establishing connections between their academic learning experiences and practical job responsibilities, hence fostering a comprehensive potential career prospect.

However, it is evident that a significant number of companies exhibit reluctance in employing students with special needs due to their limited knowledge and understanding regarding the CTP (Tordin & Tahar, 2021). Therefore, it is incumbent upon educators to engage in collaborative efforts and effectively communicate regarding CTP, thereby increasing employers' awareness of its significance and fostering their willingness to accommodate students with special needs as interns within their organizations. In addition, the employment opportunities offered by companies to graduates of the CTP contribute to the improvement of production within the respective industry.

Barriers in the Implementation of Career Transition Programme

The implementation of job training poses challenges for students across the board, mostly stemming from the issue of low attendance rates in educational institutions. The lack of public transportation infrastructure in island regions, including school vans, buses, and rental car is a significant contributing factor to the high rate of student absenteeism. The geographical distance between schools and residences, coupled with inadequate public transit options, contributes to low attendance rates among the students. Long travel distances not only result in substantial financial expenses but also require considerable investments of time and energy. Students from low-income households frequently face barriers to attending school, as their parents typically struggle to support transportation expenses, such as ferry charges required to go from the mainland to schools situated on the island.

The successful implementation of career transition training for students with special needs necessitates the provision of support and collaboration from external organizations and industries (Kohler et al., 2016). This collaboration is crucial in facilitating the acquisition of practical work experience by these students. This research findings suggests that special education teachers encounter challenges when attempting to get appropriate placements for students with exceptional needs who are seeking job transition training opportunities. The study by Wahab et al (2018) also found that the implementation of career transition programs

faces challenges when employers are unwilling to accept trainees with disabilities. The successful implementation of career transition programmes in Malaysia encounters difficulties due to employers' reluctance to accommodate trainees with disabilities (Abdul Wahab & Aliza, 2017). There are still many employers who harbour negative prejudices and exhibit a condescending attitude towards students possessing special education requirements, thereby impeding their access to authentic job experience within a genuine professional setting.

The research findings also suggest that a significant proportion of parents of students with special needs residing in island communities have a tendency to restrict their children's mobility beyond the islands, whether it be for pursuing further education or seeking employment opportunities. Parents hold the belief that their children, owing to their limitations, are not yet prepared to assume independent living and hence necessitate ongoing parental supervision and support. In the event that their offspring express a desire to engage in employment, parental consent is granted, albeit solely inside the confines of the island, with some restrictions. The aforementioned circumstance is a hindrance to the employment prospects of students with special needs, as the majority of job chances are concentrated in urban regions, necessitating their relocation from the island region.

Implications to Professional Development

This study proposes a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Education (KPM), Public Higher Education Institutions (IPTA), and Teacher Training Institutes (IPG) to engage in discussions regarding the requirements of teacher preparation courses in the domain of special education. Specifically, the focus is on CTP, which aim to offer comprehensive exposure to aspiring teachers in this field. The Ministry of Education ought to engage in collaboration with the State Education Departments (JPN) and District Education Offices (PPD) to offer comprehensive mentoring guidance on career transition education to teachers, in accordance with the guidelines set by their respective State Education Departments (locally known as "Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri").

Implications to Future Research

Future research should prioritize the examination of strategies aimed at establishing career transition objectives for students with special needs, specifically through in-service professional development training. Furthermore, it is imperative to undertake research that examines the perspectives of parents and employers in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the efficacy of the Career Transition Programme.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, the Career Transition Programme (CTP) serves as a crucial platform in providing knowledge, skills, and career experiences to students with special educational needs to prepare them for the workforce after completing their education. The readiness of teachers in terms of knowledge and skills is the key determinant of the successful implementation of this programme. Therefore, empowering teachers is a primary agenda for the Ministry of Education (KPM) to produce highly knowledgeable and skilled teachers to implement the CTP effectively in schools. High competency of teachers are the main strengths in realizing career transition training and shaping high-quality special education. Based on the research findings, the employability of students with special educational needs after

completing their education demonstrates that CTP has successfully made a positive impact on students' career experience preparation, producing special needs individuals with high employability and the ability to achieve aspirations outlined in the Malaysia Education Development Plan (PPPM 2013-2025).

There are several contributions to knowledge in this study. Theoretically, collaboration with the industry is a main aspect of a successful career transition (Kohler et al., 2016). This study has identified that there is still a lack of knowledge and experiences among teachers due to limited collaboration between schools and the industry in implementing CTP, especially in the Malaysian island context. Therefore, there should be more specific initiatives to address the geographical-related factors. This study also engaged students with educational needs in reflecting on their experiences, which are often missing from the literature. Understanding the complex collaboration between schools and working industries will inform further development of more inclusive practices in the Malaysia education system and elsewhere. This study also has demonstrated that through collaboration, teachers can enhance their knowledge and experience in implementing CTP. The professional development programme for special education teachers also needs to be intensified to produce competent, dynamic, and highly skilled teachers to facilitate productive career training for students. The knowledge, skills, and experience of special education teachers are the key aspects in ensuring the success of career transition training for students with special educational needs. School stakeholders and education policy makers will need help in understanding that a career transition programme will not work if students with educational needs were simply placed in the industry without appropriate transformations in knowledge, attitude and practices.

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