
Internship Program For Students With Disabilities: Are Malaysian Family Ready?

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Abstract: *The difficulty faced by people with disabilities (PWDs) in the job market is an issue that must be taken seriously. Career transition is a program that can provide an opportunity for students with disabilities (SWDs) to acquire relevant skills and gain work experience before entering the real world of work. Through the career transition program (CTP), the SWDs will undergo an internship program for a specified time after mastering the required job-related skills. However, family engagement is important in ensuring the success of this program. Family engagement included three aspects which are family involvement, family empowerment, and family preparation. The internship at the actual workplace has provided the platform for the SWDs not only to experience real working life but also to build their capabilities that meet the requirements and demands of the employers, this article discusses how families need to understand their role in CTP so that the internship program can have a positive impact on PWDs. Further research suggestions are also discussed in this article.*

Keywords: *Career transition; student with disabilities; parental engagement; internship program*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were introduced to promote comprehensive employment opportunities to everyone including people with disabilities (PWDs). The goal of the SDGs is to guide the government towards its universal and holistic implementation where it is individual and inclusive, to achieve global development until 2030 (United Nations, 2015). In addition to directly targeting employment, the SDGs also emphasize the need to guarantee the right of the PWDs to have equal access to get employment opportunities as well as the drive towards a quality of life.

The difficulty faced by PWDs in the job market is an issue that must be taken seriously (Lorenz et al., 2016). Job opportunities are not guaranteed for those with disabilities although they are given the same educational opportunities as typical people (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). This group is dealing with the competition that includes the employment opportunities, the skills needed plus the lack of capability and physical ability, community's perception, and the lack of skills that are in line with the employer's wishes.

Although statistics show that there are PWDs who have succeeded in getting jobs in various sectors, the issue of employment among PWDs is still the main agenda until today. Not only did they fail to get a job but some PWDs failed to stay in their jobs. Studies related to job marketable among PWDs also found that emphasis on several aspects is important to ensure

that they can work (Zainal et al., 2020). Facing career issues is difficult for them. However, in looking at employment issues among PWDs, career transitions need to be seen before they get into the real world of work.

2. CAREER TRANSITION PROGRAM

A career transition program (CTP) is defined as a set of coordinated activities designed for SWDs that encourage the transition of students to workplaces after being trained with the required work skills (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). The main purpose of the CTP to train students to acquire relevant skills and gain work experience outside of their learning environment (Alias, 2013; Zainal & Hashim, 2019). The CTP is an effort in providing initial training for students. The CTP is a combination of various activities based on the individual students' needs, their preferences, and interests to be in line with the needs of the job market, including job development as a preparatory step to work after finishing school (Zainal et al., 2020).

The CTP is a long-term effort and process. The transition program should involve planning and preparation from middle school to adult-hood (Zainal & Hashim, 2019). A successful transition program can be achieved if it involves school, employer, family, and students (Kohler et al., 2016). The CTP should have goals and objectives directed at areas that students are expected to work on after leaving school. Therefore, the activities in the transition program should cover functional academics, daily living skills, community experiences, and functional vocational evaluation. The training of the skills needed should be adaptable and suitable to the students' abilities and special needs (Leconte, 2006). The learning process and training for the SWDs should be based on the aim, vision, and interest of the students. Therefore, the implementation of the CTP should consider the students' abilities or potentials, interests, and ability to complete the tasks given.



Image 1. Taxonomy for transition programming 2.0: A model for planning, organizing, and evaluating transition education, services, and programs (Kohler et al., 2016).

The CTP needs to be designed specifically to enable PWDs to practice and strengthen the skills needed to practice in the real work environment (Alias, 2014, 2019; Bernaldez, 2015). To ensure successful planning for SWDs, strong cooperation and support from various parties such as school administrators, teachers, family, government agencies, and the private sector as well as the community is important (Abdullah et al., 2015). Through the Taxonomy Transition Program 2.0 model (Kohler et al., 2016) has outlined some key components in

implementing career transition programs for PWDs; among them is family engagement (*image 1*).

3. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

In thinking of what would happen to their adult children once they passed away (Marsack-Topolewski & Graves, 2020), family engagement has been identified as an element that can help promote social, emotional, physical, academic performance, and improve work skills among SWDs (Kohler et al., 2016). This was supported by the study that mentioned family as a support group that will have a positive impact on the CTP (Alias, 2013; Lindstrom et al., 2011). Family engagement in their child's transition planning includes how parents access information about after-school education and career options for their child's future (Griffin et al., 2010). This study shows that only 26% of families report transition programs in their child's education plans. The same study also showed parents' lack of information and guidance on after-school choices (73%) and schools fail to help families what choices they have (36%). Therefore, studies prove that the post-school transition period is a stressful time for families as they attempt to support their family members with disabilities transitioning into adulthood (Blacher et al., 2010; Friedman et al., 2013).

Family engagement is an essential component of transition program planning to ensure the success of the planned program. Many studies have shown a relationship between family and the implementation of CTP for SWDs. Family engagement in the planning of the transition program has been considered a key need (Alias, 2013; Kohler et al., 2016). For example, there is evidence showed family plays a significant and sustained role in the lives of young people on the autism spectrum, particularly in transition planning (Marsack-Topolewski & Graves, 2020; Nicholas et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019).

Family engagement in transition program planning includes how family access information about post-school education and career options available to their children's future (Griffin et al., 2010). The family will see the need for them to support and seek appropriate access as part of their involvement in transition planning (Kim et al., 2007). Griffin et al. (2010) indicated only 26% of the family reported their young adult's individualized education plans (IEPs) included a transition plan (Griffin et al., 2010). While many believe that family should take an active role in planning their special needs transition, others believe family should decide how much they want to be involved. Family involvement in CTP has been elaborated further through the Taxonomy for transition programming 2.0: A model for planning, organizing, and evaluating transition education, services, and programs (Kohler et al., 2016).

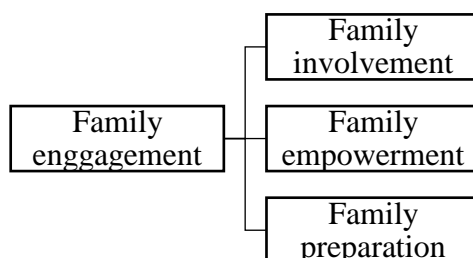


Image 2. Taxonomy for transition programming 2.0: A model for planning, organizing, and evaluating transition education, services, and programs (Kohler et al., 2016)

Family engagement covers 3 aspects: a) family involvement, b) family empowerment and, c) family preparation (Kohler et al., 2016). The details according to the aspects are as follows:

Aspects	Details
Family involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Families’ cultural background and intimate knowledge of and experience with their child informs the individual education plan (IEP) i. Families provide information about their child either orally or in writing i. Families participate in the entire transition planning process including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - student assessment - evaluation of student’s program - IEP and other individual program planning meeting - decision making γ. Families participate in service delivery γ. Families participate in natural support network as trainers, mentors, peer advocates, or community liaisons i. Families participate in program policy development i. Families concerns and needs are represented in school governance i. Non-family member interpreters provided
Family empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Transition information provided prior to student’s age 14 i. Information provided in their ordinary language and shared in culturally responsive and respectful manner i. Structured method to identify family needs γ. Pre-IEP planning activities specific to families γ. Child care and respite care provided for transition related meetings i. Supports provided for families to engage youth in community experiences i. Students and families linked with adult service providers during transition planning i. Students and families are assisted to apply for college

Family preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Family learning and preparation provided for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - transition-related planning process - empowerment strategies - setting high expectation - promoting child’s self-determination, with respect for cultural views and values - advocacy - natural supports - agencies and services - facilitating community experiences for youth with disabilities (e.g., safety, transportation, social skills, mobility) - legal issues
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The family has a big impact to ensure the present and future life of their children. Attitudes and behavior of the family can facilitate or hinder the development of children. Helping students gain maximum benefit and be able to practice skills in a variety of environments, school-based experiences and community-based experiences including working environment should be exposed to students (Landmark et al., 2010).

4. INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

The CTP from school to work environment is conducted to train SWDs to acquire certain skills and gain work experience outside their learning environment (Alias, 2014). The CTP is designed specifically for SWDs to enable them to practice and strengthen the skills needed to perform well in the real working world (Alias, 2014; Bernaldez, 2015). The CTP enables SWDS to have the opportunity in gaining the skills needed to gain work experience. This process is crucial in guiding students to ensure they succeed in transitioning from school to real-life after finishing their school year. However, the CTP should follow the ability of the students to continue their learning process in their workplace (Lindstrom et al., 2011).

Various factors can impede the effectiveness of the transition program, but working experiences played critical roles in the success of the transition from school to career development (Alias, 2019; Lindstrom et al., 2011; Zainal & Hashim, 2019). The students must be allowed to work during high school, to possess critical work skills and behavior such as teamwork, responsibility, and work ethics. Working experience will be an asset for a better job (Butcher & Wilton, 2008). Therefore, the opportunity to gain work experience in a real working environment should be given to SWDs so that they can earn a job and earn a salary. Besides that, it helps them gain critical skills related to work and behavior management in the workplace. Besides, the work experience of SWDs can improve the skills that are appropriate at the workplace, in contrast to the skills taught in the school. However, PWDs are rarely given opportunities for working experience and maximizing their potential in the employment sector although some of these special needs have basic skills in learning and vocational skills through the training they have acquired (Alias, 2013).

Through the CTP, it provides SWDs the opportunity to receive training as well as to conduct an internship program at work. The transition program is a combination of individual student needs, taking into account student preferences and interests in line with the demands of the job market, including job development as a preparatory step to work after school (Zainal &

Hashim, 2019). With the opportunity to implement a real-time practical work program, SWDs also have the opportunity to understand and improve their skills in teamwork, responsibility, and ethics at work (Lindstrom et al., 2011). The importance of the internship program has been described as one of the minimum qualifications for getting a job (Alias, 2019). This is also supported by a study that mentioned an internship program can make a positive impact on students being able to practice the skills they have in the workplace (Landmark et al., 2010).

It is supported by the CTP is not only a place to train students with work-related skills but also to provide students with the skills needed to work in the work environment (Alias, 2019). After mastering the required job-related skills, the student will undergo an internship program for a specified period. This experience will help them to be self-reliant after completing their education at school. Therefore, the work experience gained through the transition program will lead to opportunities to work after leaving school, and will indirectly increase student self-confidence to enter into the work environment (Lindstrom et al., 2011)

The CTP has improved the students' attributes such as self-efficacy, motivation, and coping skills (Lindstrom et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2018). The study also found that the interns were highly motivated to work and developed general positive interaction in workplaces. The SWDs need to know how to cope with the constant changes and demands of the work environment. Positive interactions with colleagues in the workplace can help establish a valuable mentoring relationship and ultimately lead to career advancement (Alias, 2014; Lindstrom et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2018).

5. CONCLUSION

The internship program is an important part of the transition program from school to work. The internship program has given a lot of benefits to the SWDs as they gained working experiences at actual workplaces. The work experiences that the SWDs have gained through the experiential learning during the internships at the actual workplaces have successfully increased their self-esteem, self-confidence to work independently, and also overcome their difficulties in social interactions. The internship has successfully improved the SWDs social interactions and provided positive and adequate changes in their social and working behavior.

With current developments implemented by the Malaysian Ministry of Education through a new curriculum to provide career transition programs to SWDs (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2019), parents need to understand the needs and importance of internship programs. Studies have proven that this internship program can have a positive impact on PWDS. However, further research in parental engagement is should be given major attention to ensure that their children receive the best opportunities for the future and the quality of their life. A study on family acceptance and readiness for internship programs can also be conducted. As discussed, parents are important members of the trans-disciplinary team and should be encouraged to provide feedback to the transition program team on their children's interests, strengths, weaknesses, and goals.

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