

Contextualising Transition to Work for Youth and Adults with Special Needs

Nur Khairiah Ghuzal, Manisah Mohd. Ali

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i12/11758> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i12/11758

Published Date: 09 December 2021

Abstract

Transition to Employment Training is a vital pathway to promote employment outcomes. Ineffective and improper transition planning and programming for post-secondary youth with Special Needs, as well as a weak partnership between special education schools, community agencies, and employers, are contributing causes of low employment rates and employment suitability, which are primarily a global phenomenon. This paper focuses on contextualising an employment transition programme that provides pre-employment training for adults with autism to achieve sustainable employment. It explains the concept of different aspects of transition to employment in previous studies and what are the factors contributing to the success of employment transition programs. It is found that effective transition program is defined by the quality of support services in relation to successful employability. Factors related to a good transition pathway were identified which are supported employment, job coaching and internship program for individual with special needs. This paper implies on the need for support from different parties for positive preparation towards gaining sustainable employment and should better guide the development of future programmes targeted at promoting employment opportunities for them.

Keywords: Autism, Supported Employment, Employment Transition Training Program, Internship, Job Coach

Introduction

Obtaining or maintaining employment is not an easy pursuit for many people, especially those with autism spectrum conditions. Not only that, the period and point of transition from youth to adulthood can be quite challenging for many regardless of ability. One of the biggest challenges for a person with ASD is in fact the transitioning from secondary education to post-secondary education or competitive employment (Griffith et al., 2016; Schmoker, 2014; Alverson et al., 2015). Hence, this final but crucial transitional phase is described as secondary transition to employment for post-secondary students with Special Needs (Kohler et al., 2016).

The challenges of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is unfortunately persistent and one that frequently leads to significant behavioural, communication, and social challenges which causes a lifetime adjustment to their needs and supports (World Health Organization, 2017). In fact, these symptoms have often been found to complicate their ability to manage life work transitions as well as obtaining and maintaining employment. In Malaysia, the majority of young Malaysian people with learning disabilities worked in low-paid unskilled positions and earned less than the national minimum wage, with 8% earning less than RM500 (Harun et al., 2019). As a result, they are susceptible to dependent living. This shows that a significant number of individuals with special needs in Malaysia is not rightfully employed and not given the equal chance to be employed. Yet for example, many individuals with Autism could flourish in a structured working environment and want to be given that opportunity (Remington & Pellicano, 2018). The few of adults with autism who are employed, are all too often in jobs that are conceived unsuitable: either inconsistent with their skill set and abilities or for which they are underemployed (Baldwin et al., 2014). Additionally, the employability of vocational school graduates with learning disabilities in Malaysia has reached over 70%, but 45 percent of them do not acquire jobs based on the skills they learned in school. This means that, while vocational school leavers with learning difficulties have a high employment rate, it does not commensurate with their skill set and potential (Yusof et al., 2013).

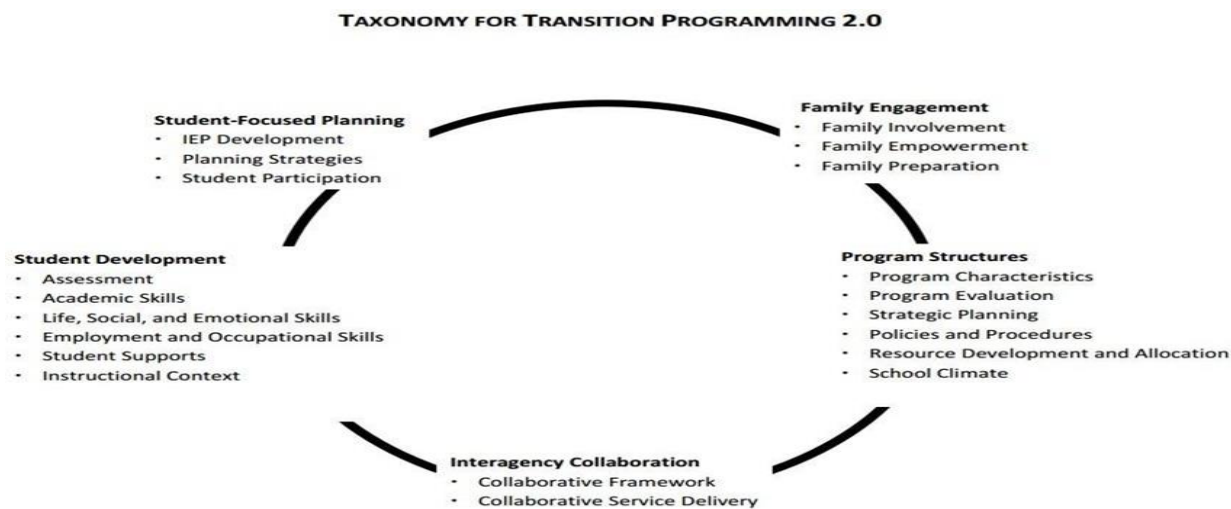
Contributing causes of these low employment rates and employment suitability which are predominantly a global phenomenon include inefficient and improper transition planning and programming for post-secondary youth with ASD along with weak partnership between special education schools, community agencies and employers (Griffith et al., 2016). According to Westbrook et al. (2014), many countries like the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada have long identified the importance of transition program. This include secondary transition planning where in the United States, the mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 is known to 'prepare students for further education, employment and independent living'.

Malaysia has yet to impose a legislation that mandates transition services for all students with special needs. However according to Malaysian Plan of Action for People with Disabilities (2016-2022) the quality and effectiveness and the numbers of employment support services and their trainers should be improved and increased so that it will enable people with special needs to have better transition towards obtaining and maintaining employment. Lack of knowledge about these experiences is currently a prominent barrier for organisations considering an initiative to employ individuals with autism (Khayatatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2019).

Conceptual Framework on Secondary Transition to Employment

The transition taxonomy was first developed to propose practices and skills required for successful Transition planning processes (Kohler, 1996). Kohler created a conceptual model to emphasize the usefulness of collaboration, strategic planning, and a student-centred focus and subsequently build upon the taxonomy to stress the importance on student supports, instructional context and cultural relevance (Kohler et al., 2016). The transition taxonomy provides structure to transition programming personnel allowing for competencies to reach the needs of post-secondary youth with disabilities. Therefore, limitations in planning, strategies and practices can be explored using Kohler's conceptual framework. The essential components of an effective transition program identified by Kohler's taxonomy are the

following: (a) student development, (b) family involvement, (c) program structure, (d) interagency collaboration, and (e) student-focused planning.



Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016)

According to Hanson et al (2017) reviews of literature on what works for transition to employment programs found 10 best practices that are aligned with Kohler et al (2016) Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0. This shows that these components in the taxonomy are key elements in an effective program because these key concepts will produce individualised experiences, services and supports. Individualised approach is what sets apart transition focused education to general special education.

Aspects Of Transition for Individuals With Special Needs

There seems to be a general consensus among researchers as to what transition is for students with special needs. It is multiple stages of movement to adulthood and independent life which involves completing school, starting higher education or gaining employment, establishing social relationships and getting involved with the community (Fung & Lan, 2017; Hendricks, 2010; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Furthermore, according to The Individuals for Disabilities Education Act IDEA (2004), transition is a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. These transition activities should be based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests (Kohler et al., 2016)

Generally, individuals with disabilities go through various stages of transitions throughout their time in school: from early intervention services to preschool, from preschool to middle school and high school and finally from high school to postsecondary education or employment. This final transitional phase is known as secondary transition. Secondary transition is a phase where students enrol into services or programs that prepare them for post-secondary education, training or employment. Several studies from the mid 80’s onwards reported that without proper planning in secondary transition services and programs, many students with disabilities would resort to substance abuse, crime or other negative activities which resulted in poor post-school outcomes such as inability to live independently, being

underemployed or unemployed and being under represented in the community (Blalock & Patton, 1996; Wagner et al., 2005; Gorter et al., 2014).

Transition to Employment Support Services

Transition services are an essential aspect in the education of students with special needs because they contain the system of support necessary to achieve the objectives related to postsecondary education, employment and the social interactions of individuals with special needs (Pesonen et al., 2020; Sugita, 2016) Support systems include local organisations, schools, parents, social interactions with the community, and social skills training (Dipeolu et al., 2015; Wehman et al., 2013). It is these scopes that researchers agree are the core to help individuals with special needs reach their potential and self-determination (Taylor & Seltzer, 2010; Emanuela, 2019). It is the operation of these supports and the exertion of these transition services that help individuals with special needs become more educated, employable and independent (Cobb et al., 2013; Emanuela, 2019). According to Nietupski et al (2006) pre-employment transition services are aid given to individuals with special needs in areas of exploring suitable jobs, experience in real working environment, career pathway counselling, employment skills training and understanding their rights as individuals with special needs. Providing an internship in a transition program from school to work is one example of support services that trainees can learn not only the necessary employment skills, but can also learn how to manage real-life working environment and social and emotional challenges that they encountered during their internships. However, undergoing training in school is not sufficient to prepare these individuals into the real working environment, they need the commitment of transition specialist and support from their guardians (Alias, 2014; Alias, 2019; Jaafar Shah et al., 2018).

Supported Employment and Job Coach for Persons with Disabilities

According to Gibson et al (2013), there are two pathways to supported employment. First, it's the 'train then place' model; a traditional model (Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019) which is usually in a sheltered environment and second, which is a more popular implementation begins with finding competitive employment then providing them with the necessary training and support in the open workplace (Jenaro et al., 2002; Gibson et al., 2013; Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019). There is also a third category of employment support according to Gibson et al. (2013) which still providing support and training necessary in an open work environment but on a time limited placement plan such as an internship or apprenticeship that gives autonomy to the special needs individuals and the employers to decide if they want to hire or be hired in that particular job.

Hanson et al (2017) described supported employment as a model that centralises on job coaching. In Malaysia, job coaches are the intermediary support personnel between individuals with special needs and the employers that provide pre-employment preparation such as interview skills, interest assessments and finding appropriate workplace to the follow-up stage during the employment where the focus shifts to the trainee's adaptability, safety and their general wellbeing (Department of Social Welfare, 2021). From 2005 to 2015, a partnership between the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare (DSW) aided the development of supported employment in Malaysia. Between 2012 and 2018, according to a study, 543 organisations used the Job Coach Service Program to hire people with disabilities, which means the job coach service program

managed to help a high number of people with learning difficulties received employment (Lan et al., 2019).

A study conducted on a job-site training of supported workers with Autism revealed that one of the benefits of training individuals with Autism on the job is the opportunity to combine it with simulation training and the result showed a more rapid acquisition of job skills (Lattimore et al., 2006) Another similar study that combined supported employment with social skills intervention program was found to be highly satisfactory for adults with autism as they reported improvements in confidence and mood in terms of building their social relationships with other colleagues (Baker-Ericzen et al., 2017).

In the UK, Project ABLE (Autism: Building Links to Employment) was conducted to examine if the Supported Employment model could be used to meet the employment goals of young people and adults with both high functioning and severe learning disabilities. The overall impact has been reported as positive by the participants not only in developing employability skills but also communication, social skills and their overall independence.

A case study on employment experiences among young adults with learning disabilities in Malaysia has found that respondents who received job coaching and career counselling were much more involved in their jobs. This study strongly recommends that at the post-secondary education level, additional supported employment training programmes for young adults with learning disabilities should be given to them (Harun et al., 2019). Another study in Malaysia, was initiated to produce significant insights into the experiences of employees with learning difficulties through supported employment scheme in a mainstream retail industry. According to Wan Abdullah (2013), the viewpoint of the participants in this study revealed that they experience a sense of recognition and achievement to be included with non-disabled employees in an open work space and appreciated the opportunity to socially interact with them.

Transition towards Career Life for Individuals with Special Needs

There are specifically eight employability skills that educators should implement in transition process at school level. Among them are communication skills, skills in using technology, skills in planning, working with others and in groups and problem solving skills. These aspects of employability skills that educators use to students with special educational needs, starting from school level determines their transition towards career life and must be recognised in order to guarantee that they are prepared to carry out activities in everyday life and at work (Yusof et al., 2020; Noor & Ali, 2019).

Employment is one benchmark commonly used to indicate adulthood. For young people with special needs, the challenges to gain employment are intensified, due to the complexity of their needs (Lorenz et al., 2016) and the influence it may have on their transition to employment. According to Scanlon et al. (2015) transition to employment is not a preordained route from education to employment but a challenging process that requires proper planning and strategies that aim towards sustainable employment. To achieve this goal, young adults with special needs should be exposed to different range of occupations and career choices (Bush & Tesse, 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2021). The more disclosure these students have to real life career experiences, the more likelihood that they will be able to

match their interests, preferences, abilities, and skills to jobs that they may want to seek following post-school completion (Griffith et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018; Burke & Boccia, 2020). Real life career experiences or work based learning experiences is a supervised transition to employment program managed by an education or training organization that links knowledge and skills gained at the work site with a planned program course. Work based learning programs such as paid or unpaid internship, apprenticeship, job shadowing and work-site visits provide different range of structure, intensity and scope within their programs and these programs that offer real life career experiences have been shown to be one of the predictors of successful secondary transition to employment (Wehman et al., 2013; Wehman et al., 2018; Whittenburg et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Transition from adolescence to adulthood is a key moment. Those with disabilities will benefit the most if assistance can be delivered in a consistent manner throughout the transition. Internship training, job coaching and supported employment are useful tools, including those with disabilities, who are transitioning from higher education to work. Taxonomy for secondary transition 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016) is a powerful model for transition services to guide trainers and trainees through the process of establishing self-awareness, tying that knowledge to career alternatives and readiness, and laying out goals and skill-building activities to help them reach these objectives.

Acknowledgments

This work has been partially supported by Dana Penyelidikan FPEND, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia with reference GG-2019-062.

Corresponding author

Manisah Mohd. Ali, PhD
Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Email: mma@ukm.edu.my

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