

Effective Transitional Plan from Secondary Education to Employment for Individuals with Learning Disabilities: A Case Study

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Abstract

One of the major goals in the education and training of individuals with special needs is to prepare them for independence. However, in the Malaysian context, parents who have special adolescents are in doubt as to what would be the future of their children soon after they have finished the vocational training. This case study explores the transitional needs and subsequently to develop an effective transitional plan from secondary education to employment for Malaysian individuals with special needs. The sample comprises two high school special educators and four persons with learning disabilities who are at work. The findings were triangulated among five co-ordinators of Non-Governmental Organisation, as well as parents for the four persons with learning disabilities and their employers. The findings reveal that transitional needs of individuals with special needs includes collaborative support system, job coaching, self-advocacy skills training, career guidance and transition assessment, vocational training, trained transition personnel and transition services. The transition process would be a collaborative process between the government and non-governmental sector. From the findings, an effective transitional plan from secondary education to employment for students with learning disabilities was drawn. Several implications have been drawn from this study.

Keywords: transitional plan, transitional needs, secondary education, employment, individuals with special needs

1. Introduction

One of the major goals in the education and training of individuals with special needs is to prepare these individuals for independence as adults. Brolin (1995) noted that it is obvious that career or vocational education and training provide the important foundation for successful transition from school to the community and place of work. There are many challenges which occur during the transition process. The transitional problems of normal children can be appeased through emotional and support in the form of reassurance but, individuals with special needs require more than that due to their inability to adjust to these natural shifts in life independently.

However, professionals in the field of special education opine that transition problems can be reduced if not solved, if parents and teachers are aware of such a need in a special child, are able to recognize it and equip themselves with knowledge that can guide the individual during transition. Hallahan and Kauffman (2000) noted that with appropriate training, persons with special needs can secure jobs successfully. Appropriate training and effective transition programs can lead to meaningful employment for adults with special needs.

Kohler and Field (2003) states that the emphasis on services as the process of transition planning and on employment as the outcome represented a somewhat narrow interpretation of the concept. With growing knowledge of the complexity of effective transition practices, many researchers adopted a much broader conceptualization of transition planning and services which are called transition focused education.

This perspective views transition planning not as an additional activity for students with special needs when they are 14 years of age but as a fundamental basis of education which guides the development of educational programs. Transition focused education is directed toward adult outcomes and consists of academic, career and extracurricular instruction and activities delivered through a variety of transition approaches and services. Kohler and Field (2003) noted that the concept of transition focused education represents a shift from disability focused

education to an education and service delivery approach based on abilities, options and self-determination.

In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997 establishes a mandate to school districts to provide comprehensive transition services to all students with special needs who are 14 years of age and older. The mandate requires state and local education agencies to develop a coordinated set of activities for students that facilitate successful movement from school to employment. The goal of such activities is to achieve standardized post-school employment and community living. The mandate also requires school to coordinate transition activities with community service agencies to make needed services more readily available to graduates after leaving school.

In Malaysia, there is yet to be a legislation which makes transition services compulsory for all students with special needs. In the Persons with Disabilities Bill 2007, section 28(1) states that:

“persons with disabilities shall not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disabilities, and children with disabilities shall not be excluded from pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education, on equal basis with persons or children without disabilities, including vocational training and lifelong learning.”

This Bill recognizes the rights of persons with disabilities to education but does not provide a mandate which will ensure that persons with learning disabilities have proper transition services during and after secondary school.

The issue faced by many parents and persons with special needs is that there is a lack of effective transitional plan from school to employment which leads to poor employment outcomes for this population. Hence, the Malaysian Education System needs to integrate transition planning into the program for individuals with special needs in this concept of transition focused education.

The employment situation of individuals with special needs in Malaysia is reported by a national newspaper, The Sun, dated Feb 23, 2005, which states that of the 60,000 handicapped people who are able to work, only 9% or 5,582 of them are employed. This shows that a large population of individuals with special needs is not gainfully employed and lack opportunities to be employed. This is an employment crisis which has significant economic repercussions and a large number of the Malaysian human capital is not being utilized to its fullest potential. Yeo (2006) noted that employment for persons with learning disabilities is limited and most persons with learning disability depend on sheltered workshops and Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBRs) to provide employment opportunities. The career development of individuals with special needs is often unmet because of the educational, social and psychological impact of disability. Therefore, it is important that students with special needs receive timely and appropriate intervention services before they complete secondary education.

In the United States, this services and intervention are mandated by IDEA of 1990, which requires that a transition plan be included in the statement of needed transition services such as vocational training, supported employment and arrangement for independent living and post secondary education. IDEA and the Vocational Rehabilitation Act 1973 recognized the need to help students transition smoothly from school to the adult world, and into employment.

The goals of transition planning for persons with learning disabilities include entering into competitive employment, vocational training programs, postsecondary education and supported employment programs as a bridge from school to work. In the Malaysian context, individuals with special needs specifically those with intellectual challenged often enter into supported or sheltered employment or job training centers run by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) before they are able to enter into competitive employment.

Transition planning is important for students with learning disabilities because it is the route to successful post-school outcomes which includes economic empowerment, community participation and a better quality of life. At an adolescent age, individuals with special needs often hold unrealistic job expectations, have inappropriate career goals, and do not have awareness of how their individual strengths and weaknesses will affect their lives educationally, socially and vocationally. The skills needed to be successful in post secondary education takes years to develop. To avoid many of these problems, transition planning for students with learning disabilities must begin early.

The provision of appropriate transition services for secondary students is problematic for many secondary school students with learning disabilities because of the lack of an effective transitional plan. Research findings by Williams (1998) suggest that young adults are at a greater risk of lifelong economic and social disadvantage are those with disabilities who do not continue to post-secondary activities. This will result in inadequate educational attainment, dependency on others and poor job opportunities.

Brolin (1995) noted that a majority of students with special learning needs have significant difficulty in achieving successful employment, independent living and social relationships after leaving the educational system. Burgstahler (2001) reveals in a survey by the National Organization of Learning Disability that in the U.S. only 29% of those with disabilities of working age are employed full or part time compared to 79% of those without disability and that 41% reported their disabilities have prevented them from getting the job they prefer or made it more difficult (26%).

Due to the low employment rates among adults with disabilities after graduating from secondary school, emphasis must be placed on improving the provision of secondary special education and transition services to foster more productive outcomes for persons with special needs and society as a whole. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 increases work-based and school-based learning opportunities. It creates a national framework to help states and communities create a comprehensive system to help all students apply classroom learning to high-wage, high-skill jobs and it advocates work-based learning and college preparation (Burgstahler, 2001).

Although their status will improve over time, and some will achieve success in employment, a majority will most likely become unemployed or substantially underemployed and low-waged workers in the labor market. They will tend to be dependent on their families and have limited career opportunities or social outlets.

In many school districts, dedicated special education teachers, counselors, social workers are trying to respond to the needs of individuals with special needs. These schools have good vocational program for students with learning disabilities, exemplary school programs have evolved to provide transition services. However, much remains to be accomplished for the majority of students with special needs to get an education that will help them to realize their potentials to achieve a career which will be beneficial to them and their community.

Specifically, the current study addresses the factors which makes effective transitional plan to meet the transition needs of individuals with learning disabilities and aims to develop an effective transitional plan from secondary education to employment for these individuals. Effective transition planning is a crucial component in ensuring that individuals with special needs receive adequate education. The goal of establishing effective transition services for persons with special needs requires collaboration from various stakeholders such as the parents, the school, government, non-governmental organizations and others. This research on effective transition plan from secondary education to employment for individuals with learning disabilities is necessary to provide insight into the curricular, instructional and organizational factors which enhance post-secondary outcomes for persons with special needs.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

Given that transitional plan is a multidimensional and complex process, it is appropriate to utilize qualitative approach in the form of case study which would provide in-depth research into the issues in transition planning, the perceived factors for success in transition plan, thus helping in the development of an effective transitional plan from pre-school to primary education that emerges from the data.

2.2 Sample and Sampling Method

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the interviews in order to gather specific information from the most knowledgeable source for the research topic. Merriam (1998), states that purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling which is a method of choice in qualitative research because the investigator aims to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned. The samples in this research are selected because of their experience and most of them have first-hand experience in providing transition services, namely based on their expertise in managing employment training or Sheltered Workshops for individuals with learning disabilities.

The participants included: Two Special Education Teachers, and four persons with learning disabilities who are employees. The individuals with learning disabilities include mild learning disability, Down syndrome and Autism. In addition, for purpose of triangulation, five Coordinators of Non-Governmental Organizations, four employers of persons with learning disabilities, and four parents of persons with learning disabilities were interviewed. Participants were selected based on their involvement in transition and special education as the key stakeholders of the study (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants of the study

Category of Participants	Description of Participants
Coordinators of Non-Governmental Organizations	a. Lee An Executive Staff of Kajang Center for Special Needs Children (Pusat Kanak-Kanak Istimewa Kajang - PKIK), Selangor, Malaysia Duration of Service in the organization: 12 years Manages an Employment Training in PKIK called PKIK Worklink
	b. Heng An Executive staff of Association for the Families of Persons with Learning Disabilities (Persatuan Keluarga Orang-orang Bermasalah Pembelajaran - PERKOBP) Duration of service in the organization: 4 years Manages a Sheltered Workshop
	c. Anne Program Coordinator in Malaysian Care in the Employment and Training Division Duration of service in the organization: 12 years
	d. Yeong Coordinator of United Voice Duration of service in the organization: 5 years Coordinates United Voice Employment Project
	e. Eng Coordinator of Kiwanis Job Training Center Duration of service in the organization: 6 years
Employees with Learning Disabilities	a. Ali Has mild learning disability An active self-advocate Works as an office assistant in Kuala Lumpur Job scope: filing, receptionist, cleaning Duration of employment: 4 years
	b. Mike Has mild Autism Spectrum Disorder Works as an Administrative Assistant in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia Job scope: Filing, data entry, photostating Duration of employment: approximately 1 year
	c. Cindy Has Down Syndrome

	Works as a receptionist in a clinic Job scope: breaking needles, labeling An active self-advocate Duration of employment: 3 years
	d. Esther Has mild learning disability (Slow Learner) Works in a factory Duration of employment: 5 years
Employers	a. Eng Li Director of Lee & Associates Employer of an employee with learning disability: a Slow Learner b. Joe Chief Executive Officer of Cryocord Private Limited Company Employer of an employee with Autism Spectrum Disorder c. Wendy Manager in KFC Manufacturing Private Limited Company Employer of employee with mild learning disability d. Cynthia Employer of an employee with learning disability St Paul's Church Office
Parents	a. Lucy Parent of a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (above 24 years old) b. Kim Parent with a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (19 years old) c. Farah Parent with a child with Down Syndrome (24 years old) d. Sheba Parent with a child who is a slow learner
Special Educators	a. Kamal Special educator b. Adam Special educator

Triangulation was used to check the data collected from different sources to identify the awareness on employment and transition needs and factors of an effective transitional plan. Mertens (2005) explained that triangulation involves checking information that has been collected from different sources or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data in ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings. The data in this study was verified by various categories of participants to avoid any biased influence in the data collection.

The data was triangulated through the various methods of data collection which includes interviews, observations and document analysis.

2.3 Data Collection Technique

The primary method of data collection was through interviews. Other forms of data collection techniques include informal observations on individuals with special needs in the secondary education setting, as well as in the employment sites.

The researcher visited the sites of the respondents to conduct interviews with 24 respondents from different backgrounds which represent the key stakeholders in an effective transitional plan. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded with the permission of the interviewees to ensure that everything said is preserved for analysis. The interviews were guided by the use of a semi-structured interview protocol designed to explore the interviewees' awareness of secondary education and employment for students and to examine their transitional needs from secondary to employment.

The researcher obtained the data through face-to-face interviews except for one participant who preferred email correspondence. Further probing questions were asked to collect more information. Since some respondents are persons with learning disabilities, the interview questions were simplified and the interview was conducted in a more informal conversational manner to put the participants at ease.

The participants who were in the category of special needs were contacted through telephone and informed of the objective of the interview. The interview conducted fell into the highly structured and standardized interview structure continuum in which the wordings of the questions and its order were predetermined.

2.4 Data Analysis

The audio recorded interviews were transcribed and re-confirmed by the interviewees before further analyzing it. The data collected from interviews was triangulated by identifying emerging themes from different sources. The coded data involved a detailed line-by-line analysis to identify specific factors of effective transition planning, as well as emerging patterns and subsequently to form categories and themes related to effective transitional plan. The final outcome would be the effective transitional plan from secondary education to employment for the particular centers or institution involved.

3. Result

The following section denotes the emerging themes pertaining to the transitional needs and subsequently a transitional plan was drawn.

3.1 Collaborative Support System

Ravi, an employer, observes that there is a need for support from the government to create a collaborative support system. In agreement with Ravi, Suzy states that persons with learning disabilities can be employed with good support system by the government.

I would say the government has to play a big role to provide support system. They can participate; they can be gainfully employed with good support system and with good follow up and support.

Ali observes that NGOs play an important role in helping persons with learning disabilities secure jobs. Eng Li acknowledges that non-governmental organizations provide some transition support services. Eng Li feels that the government should provide a support system.

Given that this country has so many people. The government must support. There is no systematic transitional period, this is where the government must come in, we need professionals to guide the government to tailor programs.

The government should provide more vocational training centers and support to persons with learning disabilities. The special educators reveal that it is important for government support and funding in providing the amenities and facilities for conducting the pre-vocational training such as fresh water fish breeding pond for students to cultivate skills in rearing fresh water fishes. The government can also assist in marketing the product from the fish farming through government bodies.

3.2 Job Coaching

Anne observes that there is a need for accommodation in the employment environment to enable persons with learning disabilities to participate in the working environment.

I would say they actually every one can participate in the working world but they think is like adaptation and modification of jobs and adjustment to also fit the individual potential and skill and the capabilities.

Anne observes that job coaching is an important support for persons with learning disabilities. Lee agrees with Anne that there is a need for support from a job coach, the government and the private sector to be gainfully employed. Lee is of the opinion that there should be government funding for job trainers and job coaches especially those in NGOs as they train a group of employable force.

Kim is also in agreement with Lee and Anne that there is a need for support and training at the workplace. It is recommended that there should be job coaching to assist persons with learning disabilities to transition to employment. According to Lee, there must be job coaches to support the clients and follow through from training to employment and job maintenance.

Ali affirms that a job coach is necessary for persons with learning disabilities to have employment. According to Eng, the trainee who was employed at a supermarket needed the support from the staff at the Job Training Center to enable the transition into employment. There is a need for support from a job coach.

I still have to look into her complaint you see, why she was unhappy, she was crying? I went to see the supervisor; I say what was actually happening you know, I believe she is under you right, uh...

Persons with learning disabilities require support from employers to be able to successfully transition into the workplace. Eng Li confirms that a job coach is important for persons with learning disabilities to be successfully employed.

First of all, the employers must be ready to help these people and assign someone to coach and guide the employee. It costs the company a bit more. After a while don't have to supervise anymore. For them they are very accurate.

3.3 Self-Advocacy Skills Training

According to Yeong, the transitional needs required during the transitional period is self-advocacy skills training to be introduced in secondary school. Self-advocacy skills begin with the awareness of self. By learning self-advocacy skills, persons with learning disabilities are able to know their own strengths and weaknesses. According to Yeong, the awareness of self is important for persons with learning disabilities because,

...to be able to recognize their own ability would be a great help for these individuals to be able to cope better with the challenges ahead of them. So that they do not have expectation beyond what they themselves can do. And at the same time do not under estimate themselves.

A very important transitional need is self-advocacy skills training which includes

...the ability to communicate, to make choices, to know their rights, and also ability to take responsibility, to realize their own responsibilities and also leadership skills. I think for all people who are moving into adulthood, leadership is part and parcel of adulthood and different one of us...everyone of us take up leadership in different forms, in different ways. So this is a skill that is important as they move on into adulthood.

3.4 Career Guidance and Transition Assessment

The transitional services which are required during the transition from secondary education to employment include career guidance, and counseling about issues on sexuality and relationships which are important for transition into adulthood. Yeong reveals that the components which should be included in career guidance includes

The components of career guidance should include awareness of the different types of employment available, awareness of their different interests and skills, having an opportunity to explore in a practical way, opportunity to explore the different types of employment that they are capable of. This should be part and parcel of the career guidance component. They should also know where to seek for help. Perhaps that can come under self-advocacy if they have a need for example, where do they seek for help. If they are not happy with their job, where do they go to complain? If they get underpaid, if they need guidance about relationship, where do they go to seek for help.

Heng states that it is important to have one-to-one discussion on creating employment for persons with learning

disabilities. Lee observed that there should be initial assessment of the abilities of the client and aptitudes. The training should include learning a variety of job skills and training in work habits and attitudes.

Eng revealed that there is a need for transition assessment to assess the abilities and capabilities of each individual. Eng suggests that the school should provide occupational therapy instead of academic teaching for students with learning disabilities. There is a need to assess their capabilities such as if they are good with their hands to match them with a factory job, or if they are good at typing, match them with an office assistant position.

3.5 Vocational Training

Kim shares her experience with her son who is Autistic that he is not ready for employment because he did not have proper vocational training. He did not have the exposure to the working environment after secondary education. Currently, he does some painting and manages to gain some unstable income from the sale of his art pieces. Kim expresses that it would be good if her son can work in an office environment with a proper job and regular salary. Kim expresses that the challenges faced as a parent with a child with learning disability, is the lack of employment opportunities and acceptance from employers. This is because of the lack of support to enable her son to gain vocational training and search for a job suited to his abilities. Kim also shares that she faced the challenge of searching for a vocational training center for her son.

Lee observes that the transitional needs of persons with learning disabilities are structured employment training programs to prepare them for employment, whether in open or sheltered employment.

A program that provides relevant and effective training in a variety of job skills and work-related habits and work discipline, work placement experience geared towards employment in open market or in sheltered environment, taking into account the aptitudes and choices of the client.

Eng states that there is a need for proper training and guidance for persons with learning disabilities and a need for job matching and job training to equip them for the job.

Proper training and guidance and all that ar, actually we, if we we...gear them towards a certain kind of job, it will be good lar, you know, as I say ar, identify what they are good at, gear them to work and see.

3.6 Trained Transition Personnel

Eng asserted that there is a need for people who are trained to train persons with learning disabilities. There is a need for understanding people who are able to train persons with learning disabilities. There is a need for job coaching when they enter into employment. Anne observed that it is important to have trained transition personnel to support the transition.

Kamal noted that it is important for persons with learning disabilities to master the skills which are thought in school to enable them to successfully transition into employment. Kim observes that trained transition personnel who is committed to teaching persons with learning disabilities is vital to the successful transition of persons with learning disabilities into employment.

Ali suggested that there should be more awareness created for employers and others to understand persons with learning disabilities. For persons with learning disabilities to secure employment, there should be more understanding from the employers. There should be trained transition personnel to provide counseling and assistance from secondary education to employment.

3.7 Sheltered Workshops

According to Eng, the biggest challenge is whether persons with learning disabilities can sustain the job. The biggest challenge as a coordinator of an NGO is to support persons with learning disabilities at work. Another challenge is to find jobs for them. Another challenge is accessibility which is the difficulty of transportation for persons with learning disabilities.

Lee shares that the challenge faced by the parents includes the lack of support from the schools and to search for services which can meet the transitional needs of students with learning disabilities. The challenge faced by employers is to train the worker with learning disability which requires additional costs.

Yeong observes that it is also important to provide sheltered employment for persons with learning disabilities. Kamal is in agreement and he shared that many parents sends their children for training at non-governmental organization job training centers to prepare them for employment. Kamal reveals that there are simple jobs such

as packing fast food condiments available in some Sheltered Workshops.

3.8 Job Placement Services

Heng expresses that it is challenging to train persons with learning disabilities. There is also difficulty in getting contract jobs such as packing straws for Vitagen or packing condiments for fast food. The NGOs have to create own jobs such as farming or making recycle paper. Certain Sheltered Workshops provide living skills and work skills training for the workers. This is in preparation for them to be independent and to learn to work.

Ahh...what we do is...ummm...they need to interact so what we do is we try and communicate with them; we place them in ah, in the context of our centre ah; we have the living skill, we have the work skills.

There is lack of supports given to students with learning disabilities from school to work. The experience of the coordinators reveals that the current curriculum does not provide much support.

Anne observes that NGOs provide support for transition to employment by doing job placements and job coaching. Kamal observes that it is important to have job placement services where persons with learning disabilities are selected to go for industrial training in companies. They should be assessed in school to determine their skills and interest. For example, a student who is interested in car mechanic should be sent for industrial training at Proton (a leading Malaysia car company) to learn how to work in a car manufacturing company. The student may have the opportunity to find a job in companies when they have the experience of working in that setting.

Cynthia, an employer, observes that job training centers are required for persons with learning disabilities where the school channel them to job training centers after they have completed secondary education and that job training centers should be set up by the government.

The system must come from the school. Yes, because they are the best people to determine the extent of the disability. It's like, same thing like when you finish your O-Level, you want to go to A-Levels. Doesn't the school decide whether you apply for A-levels and which university you go...likewise that system should be applied for people with learning disabilities. I think the ministry of education should set up job training centers.

The findings from this research have led to an effective transitional plan from secondary education to employment for students with special needs. An effective transition plan should begin from pre-vocational training from 14 years old onwards. Students with special needs who have undergone pre-vocational training should be assessed by trained transition personnel to determine the interests and needs of the student. There should also be meetings between parents, student, teacher, transition personnel to discuss an individualized transition plan. The secondary education should incorporate more intensive vocational training which should include components such as social skills training, computer skills training, grooming skills, self-advocacy skills training and many more.

The transitional process should be a collaborative process between the government and non-governmental sector. After the student has been through vocational training, students with mild learning difficulties should be sent for job placement transition services to secure employment in open employment such as supermarkets or companies. This process requires the consistent support of a job coach to enable successful job placement. Students who are not ready for open employment should be sent for job training at job training centers where they are trained in a simulated environment and will be channeled to sheltered workshops.

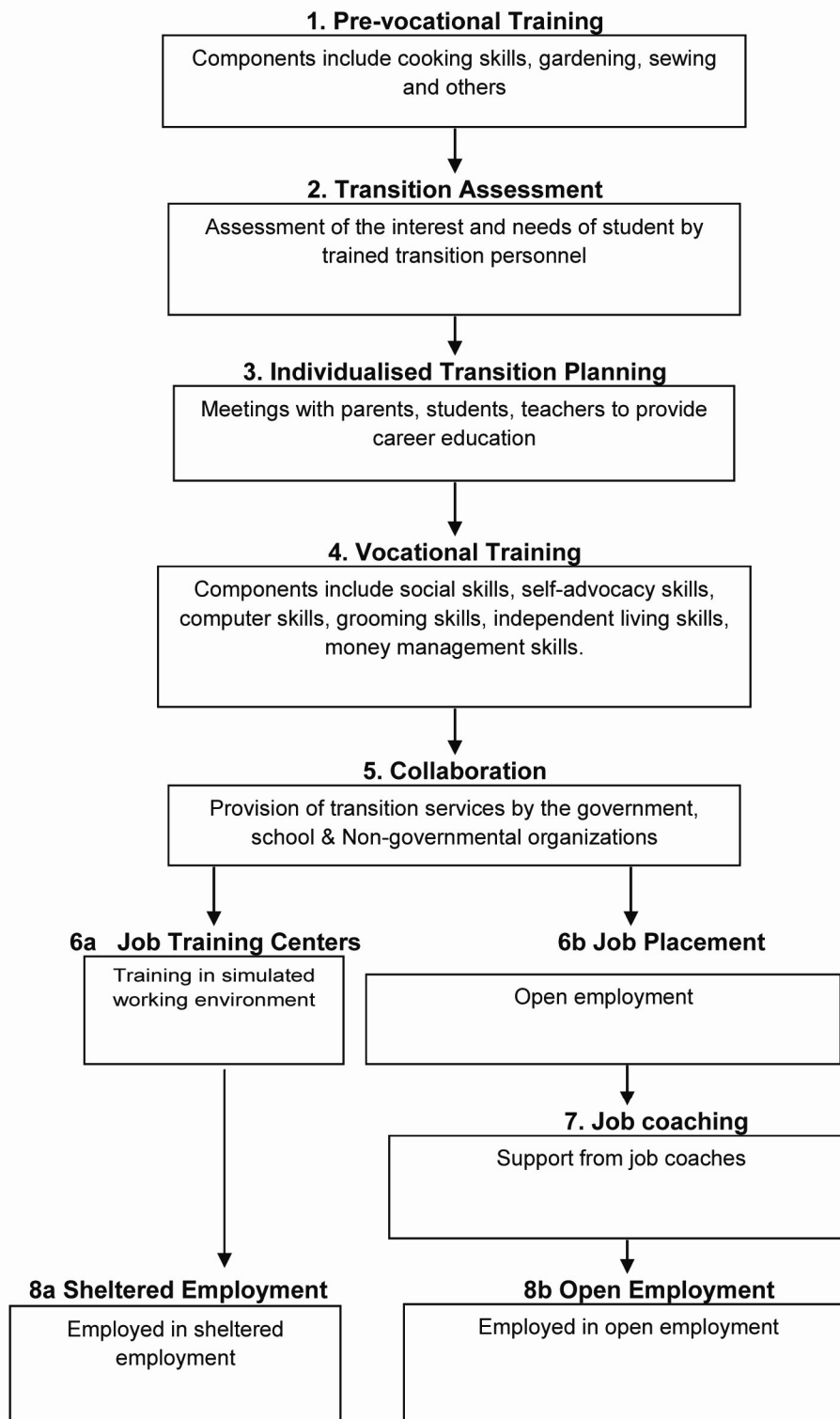


Figure 1. Effective transitional plan

4. Discussion

Past study shows that functional vocational training in school and training of the educators to provide adequate vocational training are encouraged to be introduced in all schools for students with special needs. The current

study reveals that vocational education is lacking in the special education system for individuals with learning difficulties where it should be formally introduced in the secondary education. Many parents have shared that their child was homebound after completing secondary education because of the lack of transition services to meet the employment needs of this population.

Through the interviews, many participants expressed that the curriculum in secondary education do not tailor to the employment needs of individuals with learning difficulties. The parents and coordinators of the NGOs are aware that the curriculum is more on academic with basic self-help living skills but lacking in vocational training. They emphasized that the curriculum is more focused on academic instead of vocational subjects.

According to Zhang, Ivester, Chen, and Katsiyannis (2005), there should be training of independent living skills such as learning to travel by public transportation. The participants in this study also express that learning independent skills such as travelling independently by public transport is very important. Independent skills training should be part of the vocational training curriculum in secondary education.

Milsom (2007) reveals that students perform better when they are equipped with skills to face a new environment. Transition as a process of acquiring and developing new skills should have vocational training as a major component in the process. The findings in this study is in line with the research which emphasizes on the importance of vocational training which develops the skills and abilities of the students with special needs.

There is a need to gather information on the student's individual needs to assess the students' strengths and weaknesses and provide the necessary interventions. The educators and transition personnel can provide transition assessment to provide academic and social support and create an environment suitable for transition.

Research has revealed that there is a greater need for career education during transition from secondary education to employment. Cummings, Maddux, and Casey (2000)'s research has shown that adults with learning disability often hold unrealistic job expectations, individual career goals are inappropriate, lack awareness of their functional strengths and weaknesses due to lack of career maturity. Anne in the current study observed that there are students with special needs who are unable to have realistic job expectations.

There is a lack of individualized transition planning for students with special needs. Eng suggests that the school should provide occupational therapy instead of academic teaching for students with learning disabilities. There is a need to assess their capabilities such as if they are good with their hands to match them with a factory job. There is a need for job matching to enable them to be properly transitioned into the job. The special education program should have transition assessment in every school.

Many schools do not follow the best practice in transition practices which develops an individualized transition plan by the age of 14 years old for students with special needs. Currently, there is no legislation to ensure that the transition planning is carried out. There should be legislation to mandate that transition planning should begin by age 14 and each student must have an individualized transition plan. The findings reveal that there are many individuals with learning disabilities who are not able to transition successfully because individual transition plans are developed too late. Esther, a mother of a child with Down Syndrome reveals that it was only after secondary education she sent her child to a School-To-Work Transition program run by a non-governmental organization. Transition planning should begin early because of their lack of career awareness. The pre-vocational skills and vocational skills requires a repetitive training to be able to learn effective interpersonal communication, increased self-awareness, and skills which are necessary for employment.

Stodden, Conway, and Chang (2003) recommended teaching students self-advocacy skills which is a major component of self-determination. Grigal, Test, Beattie, and Wood (1997) suggested that transition planning include student empowerment, self-determination, student-identified post school goals and self-evaluation. Previous research by Bates (1997) and Blacher (2004) addresses the need for adult literacy programs to go beyond teaching basic academic skills to adults with special needs to teaching skills in goal setting, problem solving, and self-advocacy which will help students with special needs to transition into the workforce. This research also discovered that self-advocacy is important for adult adjustment. Students with special needs will be more equipped to participate in the workforce when they are thought self-advocacy skills.

There is a need for collaboration for students with special needs to transition smoothly from school to employment. Benz (1995) reported that active participation by diverse stakeholders is vital for successful transition. The findings of this study also indicate that the collaboration among the various stakeholders is vital for successful transition.

There is also a need for more sheltered workshops for individuals with special needs who have difficulty finding employment in open employment. Sheltered workshops are a transition for some of them who may need to work

in a supported environment for a period of time before they are able to secure long-term employment in open employment.

The findings reveal that job placement is very important in the transition process. Many parents seek the assistance of job placement services from non-governmental organizations to secure employment for their children. Research by Fabian (2007) has documented that career counseling and job placement help to succeed the transition process. Secondly, paid work experience with training and support from program employer representative and thirdly, follow-along support and tracking of students to ensure that the student has a productive work experience. The job placement programs provide job readiness training to supported and competitive employment opportunities.

5. Implications and Recommendations

The lack of vocational training for students with special needs has resulted in poor employment outcomes. Many students are unable to have a successful transition from secondary education to employment because they are not equipped with the necessary vocational skills. There is a lack of centers which provide vocational training for students with learning difficulties. This shortage has resulted in many individuals with learning difficulties to become unemployed and homebound.

The findings are consistent with past studies that in order to prepare individuals with special needs for employment, the school curriculum should include vocational skills training. Confirming past research by Kohler and Field (2003) that effective transition practices emphasizes the development of practical life skills that are focused on the ambitions and goals of individual students, the finding of this study reveals that there is a need for practical skills training.

Students with special needs require individualized transition planning which incorporates more practical approach such as vocational skills, self-advocacy skills, social skills in the secondary education which is currently lacking in the curriculum of the secondary education. In view of this, the Malaysian Ministry of Education may need to consider revise the curriculum in secondary education to incorporate a more practical approach in the teaching and learning process, including career development, job training and transition services as part of the secondary education curriculum for students with special needs. There should also be pre-vocational training from as early as 14 years old. The training should include independent living skills and basic self-help skills which includes money management, using public transport and social skills.

More vocational training centers can be set up to accommodate students with special needs who have finished secondary schooling. Vocational training should include training in basic work disciplines, communication and social skills, independent living skills and computer skills. Proper transition assessment and individualized transition support planning are very much encouraged. Job placements are also necessary transition services to be provided for individuals with special needs.

While legislation is established in the USA and UK; Malaysia has yet to form a law to protect the rights of individuals with special needs and to make transition planning and services mandatory. It is good to have legislation which mandates transition planning for students with special needs in Malaysia.

The Ministry of Education may consider providing training in career education to the special educators as they play a key role in career education for students with special needs. Special Education school may also invite companies to give presentations about the jobs which are available to students with special needs. The Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Human Resource can have more collaboration with private sector or government sector companies to provide opportunities for industrial training to students with special needs during school vacations or to be integrated as part of the special education program in secondary schools.

Individuals with special needs require the support of a job coach to be integrated in the workforce. The job coach should be able to provide employment training and help workers with disabilities to complete the job successfully at the work place. Currently, there are only a few qualified job coaches in Malaysia, where more can be trained to assist individuals with special needs in the first few months of employment.

6. Conclusion

Students with special needs require more practical approach in the secondary education which is currently lacking in the curriculum of the secondary education. To enable students with special needs to develop holistically and learn effectively in secondary education, the curriculum in secondary education should be revised. There is also a need to include independent living skills training in the transition process to include money management, using public transport and social skills. Learning how to use the public transport is an important factor to enable persons with learning disabilities to work independently. Being able to manage their

money will also enable them to handle their salaries and spending wisely.

Vocational training is a transitional need for students with special needs. Vocational training should be part of the formal special education curriculum to be implemented in every school. There should be a focus on functional vocational training instead of focusing on academics.

Persons with learning disabilities need to be thought skills which are relevant for their transition from secondary education to employment. Vocational skills, self-advocacy skills, social skills are important skills which are required for successful employment. Academic subjects such as mathematics, language, geography, history and science may not be as relevant for students with special needs. They require more hands on practical skills training approach such as learning to do housekeeping for hotels, bake pastries and bread for bakeries and many more. The government should set up more vocational training centers for students with special needs. The Government should also consider providing financial support to the non-governmental centers in setting up more vocational training programs and sheltered workshops to meet the needs of students with special needs. A manual should be developed to provide a systematic vocational training curriculum to students with learning disabilities. Students with special needs require practical work experience to be able to understand the demand and characteristic of the job. Thus the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Human Resource should collaborate with private sector or government sector companies to provide opportunities for industrial training to students with special needs during school vacations or even an integrated as part of the special education program in secondary schools.

This research to discover an effective transition plan from secondary education to employment requires further research into the various factors which may affect the transitional plan. Further research should be conducted on the materials which can be used in the transitional programs. There should also be research to discover how to implement the job coach system in Malaysia. Furthermore, research should be carried out to discover the methods of setting up more sheltered workshops in Malaysia.

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Appendix

Interview Protocols

The interview protocols have been developed in accordance with the research questions, as follows:

Awareness of Secondary Education for Students with Learning Disabilities:

- a. What are the components of study in secondary education for students with learning disabilities?
- b. How important is the secondary education in helping students with learning disabilities?
- c. How is the awareness of parents in sending their children with learning disabilities for secondary education?
- d. To what extent does the curriculum of secondary education tailor to the employment needs for students with learning disabilities?

Awareness of Employment for Students with Learning Disabilities:

- a. How would employment be useful for students with learning disabilities?
- b. To what extent students with learning disabilities are able to participate in the working environment?
- c. What are the preparation that students with learning disabilities must have in order for them to be employable?
- d. What are the constraints faced by students with learning disabilities that hinders their prospect of employment?
- e. If you have the opportunity to employ students with learning disabilities, in your opinion, what type of job would you offer them? Why?

Exploration of Transitional Needs:

- a. What are the needs required during the transitional period from secondary school to employment?
- b. What is important in the provision of transitional needs for students with learning disabilities?
- c. What type of transitional programs would be useful for students with learning disabilities from secondary education to employment?
- d. What supports are given to students with learning disabilities during transition from school to work?
- e. Explain any system that facilitates students with learning disabilities from secondary education to employment?
- f. What are the challenges faced (by parents/caregivers/employer/individuals with learning disabilities) in meeting the transitional needs?