

Transition Program in Malaysia: The Challenges for Students with Special Needs in the Workplace

Mohd Syazwan Zainal, Mohd Hanafi Mohd Yassin, Mohd Mokhtar Tahar

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

E-mail: syazwanzainal@ukm.edu.my

Abstract: The transition of career begins with vocational skills training conducted in schools according to the capabilities special needs students. Then, the process goes on with a workplace training program. The transition program is able to provide students with special needs to improve their working skills as well as gain initial experience at the workplace. This case study was conducted on 5 Master of Special Education from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. This student has implemented a career transition program for students with special needs in their respective areas. Semi-structural interviews were conducted using instruments constructed based on past studies. Findings show that there are various challenges faced by students with special needs while undergoing training at the workplace. Among the challenges face by students with special needs are problem of adapting to the working environment, communication skills, difficulty to understand instruction, students' attitude completing task, relationships at the workplace and perception towards special needs students. However, through this career transition program, it can provide students with special needs with the initial experience of work skills required at the workplace. This program is able to contribute to a better quality of life after completing their education at the school level.

Keywords: Career transition, students with special needs, challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The difficulty of the special needs of getting a job is an issue that must be taken seriously (Abdullah et al., 2015). This is because job opportunities are not guaranteed for those with special needs although they are given the same educational opportunities as typical (Nasri et al., 2010). The main thing that this group should face is the competition that includes the employment opportunities, the skills needed plus the lack of capability and physical ability, community's perception (Daros et al., 2012) and the lack of skills that are in line with the employer's wishes (Abdullah et al., 2015)

In addition, special needs 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 (Aliza, 2013). In implementing a career transition program to students with special needs, one of the programs is a practical workplace program with the aim of providing students with special needs with real-world situations at work. The importance of work experience has been expressed by Oertle and Trach (2007) as one of the components to develop the minimum qualification for work in addition to training and education.

Butcher and Milton (2008) point out that working experience will be an asset for a better job. Therefore,

the opportunity to gain work experience in a real working environment should be given to special needs students so that they can earn a job and earn their own income. Lindstrom et al. (2011) point out that it is important for students to have special needs to gain work experience. Besides that, it help them gain their critical skills related work and behavior management in the workplace. In addition, through the work experience of special needs students can improve the skills that are appropriate at the workplace, in contrast to the skills taught in the school.

Career transition program by Shogren and Plotner (2012) are defined as a set of coordinated activities designed for students with special needs that encourage the transition of students to workplaces after being trained with the required work skills at school. According to Aliza (2013), the objective of the career transition program from school to the real working environment is to train special needs students to acquire relevant skills and gain work experience beyond their learning environment. With the opportunity to implement real-time practical work programs, students with special needs also have the opportunity to understand and improve their skills in teamwork, responsibility and ethics at work (Lindstrom et al., 2011). Therefore, the transition program should follow the ability of the students to continue their learning process in their workplace. This program not only to train students with skills related to the job but also to provide students with the skills needed to work in the work environment.

After they acquire the skills needed, the students will be placed at the workplace for a set period of time. 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 work environment (Lindstrom et al., 2011).

Although these special needs students are trained and ready to work but the success of the career transition program depends on how students adapt to their work environment. Special needs students face challenges with social communication and skills in the workplace as well as their behavioral issues that will interfere with the process of obtaining work experience. The objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by students with special needs during their training at the workplace.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using case study design. This study involved interviews with five respondents, which are students with special needs at the secondary school in Malaysia. The interview has been done to describe the challenges faced by students with special needs while undergoing training at the workplace. The qualitative approach is based on the assumption that, the meaning or reality of a phenomenon is socially constructed by the perpetrators involved in the phenomena studied. The conduct of qualitative studies typically does not have a standardized procedure that meets the expectations and needs of all parties.

In addition, researchers also used “probing” questions which could provide more information to obtain richer data and information such as ‘Can you please explain further?’ and ‘Why do you think so?’. “Probing” is aimed at increasing the richness of data as well as obtaining more clarity or understanding of the phenomena being studied. The researcher used probing technique to encourage participants to provide a detailed description of the experience, learning and all matters related to research questions. In addition, probing is also used to obtain certainty and clarity by applying examples for a particular item specified by the study participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by students with special needs during workplace training. Feedback from respondents is analyzed and data reveal that students with special needs face difficulties at the workplace.

Adapting To The Working Environment

Most of the issues faced by students with special needs during workplace training are they fail to adapt to the environment at work well. They feel unsafe and uncomfortable to work in a completely different and new environment. All respondents agreed that they had problems adjusting to the routines and regulations at their workplace. As a result, teachers should help these special needs students to receive a new environment as a place to learn and gain work experience. At the beginning of the training, the students are always explained why they need to be there and do the assigned tasks. In addition, the need to learn and acquire new skills in accomplishing the task is also a problem for students. They are not happy with this situation. Additionally, students also find it uncomfortable to meet new acquaintances at work such as supervisors, co-workers and customers. This uncomfortable situation affects their productivity in the workplace.

Communication Skills

Through the findings of the study, respondents stated that the interaction of students with special needs at work was quite limited between colleagues, supervisors and customers. This situation will make it difficult for students to get good working experience if student interaction or communication at their workplace is weak. Students are ashamed and have low self-esteem, they are afraid or refuse to interact with their colleagues or supervisors even if they are having problems completing work at the workplace. In addition, students are also more difficult to share information with colleagues and difficulty understanding and responding to current situations at workplace accordingly.

Difficult to Understand Instructions

During training at the workplace, special needs students are required to learn new things or new skills from their colleagues and supervisors. Because of their colleagues or supervisors who do not understand the disadvantages of the student, the student fails to understand the instructions given. The working environment in real workplace is completely different from the school’s learning environment. Giving the instruction from someone who does not understand the students’ inability will prevent the student’s process of getting work experience. In addition, students with special needs face the misunderstanding of the tasks assigned to them. The students claimed that there was a misunderstanding about the assignment given and the students assumed that the assignment was not in their job scope. Therefore, students feel they are discriminated against. This makes students less motivated in the workplace.

Students' Attitude in Completing Tasks

Through this study, special needs students who did training at the workplace had difficulties in following the rules and work procedures given by the supervisor. They also feel bored with the task given because they are not interested in learning new things or having difficulty completing tasks efficiently. Students are easily angry when they have been asked to do the right instruction of their work. Students also do not interested in doing some of the tasks given because they feel bored with the same task or they are faced with difficulties in accomplishing task. It gives the impression that students lose their focus easily while performing their duties and fail to complete the task efficiently.

Relationships at Workplace

The study also found that relationships with employers and colleagues was as a challenge for students with special needs while undergoing training at the workplace. Respondents explain that employers and partners are difficult to understand the needs and feelings of these special needs students. For example, other typical colleagues sometimes can not accept if any of these special needs students are members of their team. Typical workers think these special needs students as additional work load for them as well as slowing down their work. The lack of understanding of the needs of these students explains that both employers and colleagues are unaware and insensitive to the needs of disable students.

Perception Towards Special Needs Students

One of the obstacles faced by students with special needs during workplace training is the perception of employers and colleagues towards these special needs students. In the work environment, colleagues, supervisors and employers have a biased view of the ability of students to work, powerless, inefficient, and the students need a lot of help to work. Through the interviews conducted on the respondents, there are also employers who give negative perception to the ability of students with special needs. There are employers who refuse to accommodate students with special needs to undergo job training at their premises by giving the reason that the attendance of these special needs students will burden the employer as well as reduce the productivity of the company.

Discussion

This study reveals the challenges faced by students with special needs to gain work experience in the real working environment. One of the findings shows that these special needs students have difficulty adapting

to new learning environments, different from their comfort zone at school. They feel uncomfortable with new environments and individuals they are new to at work and cause behavioral problems at work.

As a result, students are forced to rely on their teachers during the first few days of training to help them adapt to the new environment before they begin to trust and accept co-workers and supervisors at work. Feeling as one of the teams in the work environment also helps students with special needs feel comfortable working in the workplace.

The success of special needs students acquired work experience closely with individuals in working environments such as colleagues and employers. Commitment to understand and provide the needs that are capable of supporting students with special needs physically, socially and emotionally required. Noraini and Mazmi (2018) suggest that support during workplace training is available across multiple domains such as physical facilities and emotional support.

Although students were initially having difficulty adapting to the work environment, they were able to overcome problems and successfully adapt to the workplace. Although it starts quite late, with the understanding of colleagues and supervisors as well as employers it helps students not only gain work experience but also increase the level of self-confidence and self-efficacy at work.

The acceptance of these special needs students as part of the team by other colleagues is important in accomplishing the task given as well as helping students overcome their shyness in communication and low self-motivation. In addition, employers should also be aware of the needs of students to feel safe and acceptable in the work environment not only physically but also social and emotional needs in their premises. It's very important to help students with special needs get the best work experience. It is supported by Lindstrom et al. (2011) that special needs pupils will be more motivated to work and have positive interaction at work if given support at the workplace.

Wahab et al. (2018) stated that the implementation of a career transition program to special needs students was confronted with situations where the employer objected to accepting trainees as less-motivated employers to help individuals with special needs. This is due to negative perception (Noraini and Mazmi (2018) and the attitude of streamsip towards special needs students (Sairi, 2017). However, according to Aliza (2013) and Wahab et al. (2018), there are still employers who are concerned and want to participate in the career transition program but lack preparation from the knowledge aspect of special needs individuals as well as suitable infrastructure facilities for individuals special.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the challenges presented by this study are the challenges faced by students with special needs while undergoing training at work but the real list of obstacles is far wider, including key factors such as supervisors or leadership issues, work conflicts, or workplace organizational culture. As such, there is still a need for a study that assesses the barriers or challenges faced by those with special needs at the workplace.

There are not only teachers, but efforts to raise awareness to employers, especially in helping students with special needs to gain the opportunity to work and to be self-reliant in the world of work also need to be improved. This given awareness can help employers prepare to receive trainees for career transition programs as well as appropriate support for students with special needs.

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