

# Vocational Education as a Career Pathway for Students with Learning Disabilities: Issues and Obstacles in the Implementation

Noraini Abdullah<sup>1</sup>

Mohd Hanafi Mohd Yasin<sup>2</sup>

Abang Adam Abang Deli<sup>3</sup>

Nur Aishah Abdullah<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Faculty of Education  
National University of Malaysia  
Selangor, 43600 Malaysia

## Abstract

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*The special vocational education curriculum is an alternative curriculum to provide fresh opportunities for students with special needs. Hence, this study was done to explore the issues and challenges of vocational education for students with learning disabilities towards their career preparation. This study used a qualitative approach with case study design. Data were collected using interviews involving 6 teachers from vocational in 6 Special Education Program Integration with Learning Disabilities (SEPILD). The data is analyzed using Atlas.ti 7.5.2 software. The results showed that there are three major challenges, namely the difficulty in implementing teaching and learning in vocational education curriculum, in collaboration challenges and challenges in the provision of career experience for students. It is hoped that this study will identify problems in the implementation of vocational education for students with learning disabilities to be in line with their abilities and meet the needs of employers.*

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**Keywords:** Vocational Education, Students with learning disabilities, Career Preparation

## 1.0 Introduction

The transformation in vocational education that was started in 2013 should be implemented simply because this change will provide well-skilled workforce that is trained to meet the demand of the country to enter the job market. With regard to this, vocational education for students with special needs ranging from learning disabilities, hearing impaired and visually impaired should not be marginalized. Based on 2012 statistics, the number of students with learning disabilities in secondary schools in Malaysia is 19,462 (Annual Report, 2012). This number has raised a need for the Ministry of Education (MOE); in particular the Division of Special Education; to create a skills-based curriculum of vocational training for the students with learning disabilities as an alternative to the existing curriculum to ensure that they are also capable of being accepted to work as a normal group (Zainudin, 2008). The study by Ramlee (2004) showed that vocational education is a prerequisite for the preparation of pupils with special needs to compete in the job market.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Vocational Education Programme involving Students with Learning Disabilities

Vocational education for students with learning disabilities was started back in 2002 in the Special Education Programme consisting students with learning disabilities in primary and secondary schools, where the pre-vocational component is one of the five areas in the curriculum. Curriculums in the pre-vocational component consist of cooking, sewing, agriculture, trade, launder and fish rearing.

In 2005, the curriculum draft of Pre-Vocational Education Students with learning disabilities that was approved contains six components: cooking, sewing, maintenance, agriculture, services and crafts. The components of the field of pre-vocational skills which emphasize the useful and practical pattern are based on the hidden ability of students with learning disabilities. In 2006, the Pre-Vocational Subjects were converted to Special Vocational Subjects and were implemented in 6 Pilot Pre-vocational program involving four states which are Wilayah Persekutuan, Selangor, Malacca and Johor. The vocational education is implemented through the Special Vocational Subjects performed to pupils learning in the Special Education Program Integration between the ages of 16 to 19 years. The purpose of this curriculum is to develop and strengthen the potential of the existing skills in students with learning disabilities in order to benefit them when they leave school in tune with the National Special Education Philosophy which emphasizes the independence (Guidelines for Implementation of the Pilot Program Special Vocational Curriculum, 2006).

## **2.2 Requirements in the implementation of Vocational Education for Students with Learning Disabilities**

Vocational education for students with special needs is introduced to meet the needs of a more flexible curriculum, focused, attractive and compatible with the capabilities and abilities of special needs students to assist them in their quest of acquiring a specific skill (Department of Special Education, 2005). Through vocational education, special needs students can use the skills acquired to be independent either to get a job or to apply the skills to engage in business and entrepreneurship. Previous findings shows that the curriculum structure that is accompanied by training of career experience, vocational education and employment goals are an indicator to get a better job (Fabian et al, 2007). The study by Siti (1999) showed that a special vocational curriculum for students with learning disabilities should not be too academic in nature. It is therefore must be compatible with the intellectual capacity of the students and able to emphasize the aspects of building positive attitudes of students towards the curriculum in order to absorb the content available and thus can acquire the specific skills mentioned. The introduction of special vocational curriculum involves the planning aspects of the availability of the teachers.

It is due the fact that teachers who will carry out the execution of the plan is the catalyst towards the implementation of the curriculum. Taylor (2012) emphasized that the role and attitude of teachers greatly influence the achievement of students, therefore teachers need to promote self-reflecting attitude or show high self-esteem to motivate students and to project a positive attitude for the future. Special vocational curriculum should also pay attention to the aspect collaboration. Zainudin (2009) in his study pointed out that collaboration with the community in education is very important to enhance the skills and career of group with special needs. The special vocational curriculum for students with learning disabilities should be tailor-made to expose the students involved to skills in socializing, career counseling, improving their self-confidence, independent living, vocational training, adaptation to the job, reading and spelling skills, organizing and governing the financial aspect, moral of entrepreneurship and self-control skills that are key to success in any career field (Sitlington and Clark, 2006).

## **3.0 Problem Statement**

The Malaysian government has allocated 1% of the employment share in the public sector for the handicapped or people with disabilities (Service Circular 2010). However until now, the handicapped or people with disabilities still remain to be fully accepted openly in the job market and they still face problems in getting suitable employment (Zinaida, 2006). Indeed, the proficiency level of pupils with special needs is low and those who have completed their basic education in schools are not skillful enough to work and they are not absorbed into the work force (Crystal et al. 2012). A review opinion by Domzal, Houtenville, and Sharma (2008), employers had been reported to be less interested in hiring people with disabilities due to their lack of employability skills. The weakness seen in many educational institutions lies is the weak preparation of pupils with special needs which includes the inability to provide them with the essential employability skills to suit the needs of employers (Zainuddin et al., 2009). Teachers play a very important role as a planner, developer and evaluator in this particular education (Taylor, 2012) thus these teachers need to equip themselves with knowledge and skills needed to teach vocational education to students with learning disabilities.

In terms of pre-service teacher training, career development is a very limited aspect of the special education curriculum. Very limited or almost no effort had been put in to integrate the needs of transition activity into the vocational development program for teachers, counselors and administrative staff (Agran et al., 2002).

Many educators lack the awareness of the importance of career development to be integrated into the school curriculum to support and channel the pupils into the career world, as well as not having adequate technical skills (Mohd. Hanafi, 2009). Collaboration between service providers and communication and partnership between parents, corporations, community agencies, teachers and others in school is the key to the success of the vocational training and career development-based transition activities (Kohler & Field 2003; Landmark et al. 2010). A study by Sanbagavali in 2001 found that most parents of pupils in special education play a passive role in the program outside of the classroom, causing a difficulty to carry out effective cooperation in the schools because this involves a complex process. The continuity between education and job opportunities is not yet effectively implemented between the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Human Resources. Therefore, this study was undertaken to explore the issues and challenges faced by teachers who teach vocational education for students with learning disabilities toward the students' career preparation.

## 4.0 Method and Sampling

### 4.1 Research Design

This study applies a qualitative approach using a case study design. Case study is an in-depth research, carried out through the collection of data that can explain the phenomenon. Data is collected through interview sessions to explore the issues and challenges in the implementation of vocational education for students with learning disabilities.

### 4.2 Sampling

This study involves six teachers who teach vocational education in the Special Education Program Integration with Learning Disabilities (SEPILD) in four states namely Johor, Malacca, Selangor and Federal Territory. The selection of study participants is based on purposive sampling which includes fulfilling the needs of the research questions, readiness to co-operate, easily interviewed and able to provide in-depth information related to the research.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

Data gathered from interview is saved in transcript using the application software Digital Voice Editor 3. Data and information collected are analyzed using the software Atlas. Ti 7.5.2 to generate themes to answer the study's research questions.

## 5.0 Finding and Discussion

This study was conducted to explore the issues and challenges in the implementation of vocational education for students with learning disabilities in their preparation for future career. The findings resulted in three main challenges faced by teachers who teach vocational education for students with learning disabilities.

### 5.1 Challenges of Implementing Curriculum Vocational Education

The finding of the study shows that most of the teachers who are teaching vocational education to students with learning disabilities use the syllabus provided by the Division of Special Education, Ministry of Education Malaysia. For the process of instruction, most of the teachers had to modify the syllabus to facilitate their teaching in tandem with the capability of their students due to their different categories of disability. Teachers also have to go the extra mile to look for other alternatives such as attending skills workshops at district level, modifying the curriculum of normal vocational education to suit the need of their students with learning difficulty and sourcing any additional relevant information via the internet.

*"... I teach but not really following the normal vocational curriculum... It's just that ... I study the students' level of capability and then I adapt the curriculum to suit their level, I adjust a little bit for them ... based on the normal vocational curriculum ..." (G2S2)*

*"... the scheme given...initially it's ok but too high for students with learning disability ..we modify the scheme to suit their students' level . The scheme they give is for the Indahpura Vocational school because that is a select school...so we adopt and adapt for our students' need ..." (G4S4)*

In the aspect of evaluation, students are assessed in the form of theory and also the practical. Most of the assessment carried out are very dependent on their teachers due to problems such as the lack of references and no specific guidelines for administering assessment to the students.

*"... actually there is no specific guideline for the evaluation practice, therefore I did it based on my own experience because I have taught vocational subjects. I formulated the assessment and evaluation of the students on my own ... "(G4S4)*

*"... I kind of do my own valuation based on checklists...even the written test even is done based on what I had taught them... there is no specific books of reference ..." (G6S6)*

Findings of the study show that teachers involved are teaching the vocational education to students with learning disability without the appropriate skills and knowledge in the subject matter because they are not of special education options not from options in technical and vocational education. Courses to improve the skills of teachers in vocational education for students with learning disability are also very seldom held. Most the teachers use their own experience during teaching and also take their own initiative to attend skills improvement courses in order to reach out to their students.

*"... I did not have the skills, I learned how to go by attending courses, through own reading, surfing the internet, and also learning from others ..." (G2S2)*

*".. it so happened that I know how to sew, so I use my expertise to teach my students how to do it, how to use the machine, how to do minor repair on the machine.. "(G3S3)*

In the implementation of the curriculum that had been set, the use of materials, techniques of teaching, facilities and special equipment is a prerequisite in the special education, in accordance with the capabilities and needs of the students (Hallahan & Kauffman 2003). A study conducted by Maslinda, Mohd Safarin and Muhammad Sukri (2012) discovered that in preparing students with special needs; in particular for those with learning disabilities; into the working environment requires changes in the standard vocational curriculum and emphasis on a special vocational curriculum in their school. Teachers should also be given appropriate training so that they have the sufficient skills and knowledge to teach vocational education for students with learning disabilities. Zainudin (2008) states that the Vocational Curriculum subjects necessitates and involves the planning of teachers upgrading and up-skilling through in-service training scheme as a measure to enhance the effectiveness of the curriculum.

## **5.2 Challenges in Collaboration Interaction**

The success of special education students in completing an educational program is dependent on the collaboration aspects that involve parties such as schools, teachers, parents, agencies and the community itself. The study discovered that the majority of parents who are involved in vocational education for students with learning disabilities show less interest in participating in the activities conducted by the school. This is because they are too busy with work and fully surrender the task of educating and performing any activity for their children to the teachers.

*"... when we do activities, some parents do come, but not many...those with busy working schedule have their own difficulty to come ...however some of them called to ask about their children ..." (G2S2)*

*"... parents have been supportive of what we want to teach their young children, they totally leave their children to the care of the teacher to teach them any skill for their survival ..." (G3S3)*

Collaboration with agencies such as collaboration in education, the study has discovered that special education students who wish to further their education to college level face a problem because they do not have SPM qualification or MSC and are difficult to be accepted because of their special education bearing.

*"... I have tried to beg for the boys, but those people want the SPM certificate ... and unfortunately these unlucky boys .. academic qualification is what they do not have ..." (G1S1)*

*"... some of them has the Giat Mara or ILP certificate though ...but SPM requirement remains their problem. If the constraints of SPM can be waived for them, meaning some flexibility for our students to qualify in terms of application...if the entrance minimum requirement can be relaxed for our students ... "(G3S3)*

As for collaboration with the community, there are some schools that embark on collaboration with the local community such as a collaboratively cleaning the mosque, site visits such as to rice fields and chilly farm. On the other hand, there are also schools that do not establish any relationship with the community due to problems related to the students, transport and finance and the community do not really understand and know about the special vocational education that is taught in the school.

*"... we rarely do activity outside of the school because it is quite difficult to control the students. By the way, if ever we want to take them to go out, we have to write a letter asking for permission, it is a bit fussy ... "(G6S6)*

*"... I think outsiders do not know..... they have no information about schools that run MPV programs ... so if we want to, we need to have to have program.....with approval from the Ministry we can organize a program that we can expose to the NGOs outside our school .. but so far they did not know anything ... "(G4S4)*

Previous studies had found that collaboration between service providers and communication and partnership between parents, corporations, community agencies, teachers and others in school are the key to success of vocational training activities and career development (Kohler & Field 2003; Landmark et al. 2010). The ability of educators, support from parents, community agencies and employers in the process of providing them the expertise, knowledge, and opportunities to make them live independently, being productive, and having fun to carry out responsibilities as members of society. There is an arising need to engage in an effective collaboration involving school administrators, teachers, parents, community agencies and the community (Landmark et al., 2010; Noonan et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2005). Parental involvement has also been identified as an element that is able to help promote social, emotional, physical, academic performance and improve occupational skills among the students. The success of family involvement brings great meaning to collaboration between parents, students, schools and agencies involved (Blackmon 2008; Grigal et al. 2004; Morningstars et al. 2012).

### **5.3 Challenges Towards Career Preparation Students with learning disabilities**

Teachers of vocational education teaching students with learning disabilities toward career preparation face several challenges. The first challenge is for sure the students' own attitude. Students with learning disabilities are made up of various disabilities that limit them in undergoing vocational training taught in schools. Laziness, giving-up, easily bored, skipping of classes and emotional problems make it difficult for teachers to teach students with learning disabilities.

*"... these students easily fall into despair, sometimes we send them to work which occasionally they can last for weeks, but truancy also occurs because they easily get bored. In many situations these students cannot work on their own, they need friends around them ... "(G1S1)*

*"... these special education students have low self-esteem, difficult to get along with others, cannot be reprimanded, so these attitudes need to be changed ...." (G3S3)*

The second challenge is about the difficulty of getting suitable practical training institution outside of their school. Vocational education teachers say they find it difficult to send the students out of the classroom for training due to a number of things such as the employer is not interested in taking students with learning difficulties in their training scheme, students' own problems, time factor and also the transportation problem. Employers are less confident in the students due to their inability or lacking in performance.

*"... some employers do not accept special education student. When I asked whether they receive students with learning difficulties, she said "...I have received this type of boys but they have communication problems with the clients, the panicked ..." (G5S5)*

*"... I used to take a boy for practical at a launderette, he can work when the teacher is around.. but when the teacher is gone, he totally cannot do anything, he wanted the teacher to be with him...it is impossible ..." (G3S3)*

Third, there is no certificate of accreditation. Teachers who teach vocational education for students with learning disabilities do not have a certificate of MSC (Malaysian Skills Certificate) in order to qualify them to teach. Similarly, students who complete their studies in specific skills but no certificate is given to recognize their skills.

*"... As far as the certificates of recognition...there is none. Pupils will only be provided with file of evidence. There is no recognition from anybody, not even the recognition for teachers ... "(G4S4)*

*"... after they have finished their school, there is no MSC certificate from the ministry, they receive only a school leaving certificate. We have the record of him being in the Vocation Program in the school ... we have it in their file. There is no black and white from the ministry...does not exist. "(G5S5)*

Mental and physical disabilities are other factors that hinder the success in the lives of students with special needs. Review by Safani and Salleh (2000) stated that the main problem of the disabled is their own preference of only listening to friends in their group.

Similarly Low self-esteem, not confident of their ability, unable to adapt and difficult to interact with others (Safani et al. (2000); Sarimah et al. (2012). According to Jamiah (2010) actually students with learning disabilities can be taught and trained if the methods used are appropriate to their individual needs. Previous studies showed that the approach that is effective in providing students with learning disabilities to work is through the form of vocational education (Ramlee & Norani, 2007). The perception of employers towards people with disabilities should also be rectified so that they get the rights and equal treatment with the normal. So is the certificate of accreditation, teachers and students with learning disabilities must be given a certificate in recognition of the skills they possess.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Implementation of vocational education for students with learning disabilities is an important agenda to be addressed by the government to improve the skills and capabilities of independence among students with learning disabilities. School is a place that provides an environment to develop the skills necessary to participate in society. All students, including students with learning disabilities should receive the convenience of learning and experience and competencies needed to succeed in community life, employment and social experience (Morningstar et al., 2010). If people with special needs can benefit from specific capabilities that they have, they too can succeed like others to master certain skills more effectively. At present, there are various job opportunities, but the extent of the employment opportunities available to be filled with the special needs workforce. This claim to the role of Special Education teachers to understand the concept of careers related to those with special needs. This statement shows that the education given to the special needs is to enable them to get jobs. Therefore, the cooperation of various parties such as school administrators, teachers, parents, government agencies and the private sector and the community is necessary to ensure that all plans that have been planned was accomplished successfully.

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