

## The Application of Epstein's Model in the Implementation of Career Transition Programme for Students with Learning Disabilities

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**Abstract:** The career transition programme is a programme implemented to prepare students with special needs (SSN) to face future working environment. Parents are among the factors contributing to the successful completion of SSN's career transition programme. This survey was conducted to identify the level of involvement of SSN parents in the implementation of career transition programmes in schools. The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire consists of 48 items with five points Likert scale. This questionnaire was developed based on six elements of Epstein's Parental Involvement Model: i) parenting, ii) communication, iii) decision making, iv) learning at home, v) collaboration with the community and vi) voluntary assistance. This study involved 30 respondents comprising parents of SSN who had undergone a career transition programme at Special Education Integrated Program (PPKI) at four secondary schools in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. The data were analysed descriptively using SPSS software. The findings show that parents' involvement is high in terms of communication and voluntary assistance while their involvement in parenting, decision-making, home-based learning, and collaboration with the community is at moderate level. Parents' education level was found to have no significant relationship with the level of parental involvement except for communication and voluntary aspects. The findings of this study can give some insights to policy makers to increase parents' level of involvement in the context of planning and the implementation of programmes to support SSN's readiness for the career realm. Parents are encouraged to improve their advocacy skills and awareness on the importance of their roles in the career transition.

**Keywords:** Parents involvement, Special Education Integrated Programme, collaboration, career transition programme, students with special educational needs.

The career transition program is a combination of activities for students from during-school to after-school activities. The combination of these activities refers to the student's individual needs, taking into account students' choices and interests, including instruction, community experience, job development and various objectives of adult life after school years (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). But the reality is that most students with special needs complete their formal education at school without any future plans. This issue should really grab the attention of parents who must have been thinking about their children's future. Students with special needs must be provided with appropriate skills and given opportunities to apply them in real working environment to enhance their self-esteem. Unfortunately, the implementation of the SSN career transition program is still at a low level and unholistic phase (Abdullah *et al.*, 2015).

The implementation of an effective career transition program should involve several related parties. This inter-agency collaboration is defined as a team of students, parents, school representatives and representatives of external agencies working together in implementing, coordinating and developing transition service plans to youth with special needs (Madinah, 2014). They are responsible for planning and

coordinating a career transition program implemented on a student with special needs. According to Wehman (2013), there are six key themes that can help students with special needs work towards a better and more self-reliant life namely self-esteem and self-advocacy, social skills, work efficiency, education background, parental involvement and further education. Effective parental support throughout the transition process is very important as they can help in identifying the needs and giving recommendations on the implementation of career transitions. Parents can become consultants in terms of providing information. Their involvement is one of the key factors that determines the effectiveness of a transition program. (Grigal & Neubert, 2004; Lindstrom *et al.*, 2011; Wehman, 2013).

Parents of students with special needs can play a role in the implementation of career transition programs. However, previous studies have shown that parents' contributions and involvement are still at a moderate level especially those involving the planning aspect (Fiedler *et al.*, 2007). Parental involvement means that they know the choices given by the school and employers as well as know how to deal with any of the less collaborative situations they face during the transition process. Parental involvement also refers to their participation in activities organised by the school

or volunteerism acts in their children with special needs education program. The success of parents' involvement gives a great deal to the collaboration between parents, students, schools and agencies involved (Madinah, 2014).

Epstein *et al.* (2002) explains that the findings of some studies showed that most parents are concerned and want to get information from schools related to their children's education. He added that students learn more effectively when homes, schools and communities work together to support student learning and development. As such, the Epstein Parental Involvement Model framework emphasizes six elements that enhance parental involvement, namely parenting, communication, volunteering, home-based learning, community-based decision making and collaboration. Each element of the engagement contains various forms of co-operation where each practice involves certain challenges and obstacles to be addressed so that parental involvement can be improved. Each practice will also produce different decisions depending on students, parents, teaching strategies and school climate. Hence, the school has several choices of methods or practices that are perceived to be helpful in achieving the targeted goals.

#### *Research Background*

In line with the expansion of the implementation of the new curriculum system, namely the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah Pendidikan Khas (KSSMPK) which has begun since the year 2017 focusing on the learning of vocational skills for students with special needs, then the transition element is essential to be instilled in the teaching and learning process. It is important to prepare students who have not only been given the skills but also the readiness to deal with the work environment. Also, it allows SSN to strengthen themselves with self-reliance, advocacy and social skills so that they are more confident and independent.

The success of a planned program will be less effective without the integration elements and cooperation between the various parties. Hence, in the context of a successful career transition program, it is recognized that support from parents and other members of the community is truly necessary to meet the goal of integrating SSN into the world of work. SSN needs to interact with outside societies and adapt themselves to any changes that occur in the routine of their daily work. Career training at the secondary school level is an important indicator that secures job placement after graduation and parental involvement in their child transition program is the third step that will help the success of job transition to students with special needs (Madinah, 2014). Hence, Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) also focuses on learning system that involves collaboration between parents,

communities and the private sector. The collaborative aspect of the school and parents is emphasized through the shared responsibility element between teachers and parents as well as raising awareness and expanding the role of parents in improving the success of their children. Therefore, a policy has been introduced by the government named as 'Sarana Ibu Bapa' to fulfil the aspiration. In addition, parental involvement in the SSN transition planning process has also been clearly mandated in IDEA 2004 (Polloway *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the efforts to increase the level of parental involvement are also the efforts towards fulfilling the IDEA policy demands at the same time in order to bring SSN to a better achievement (Burke, 2013).

In Malaysia, studies on the involvement of SSN parents have been conducted by several researchers involving the different aspects of parents involvement involving SSN education (Taib, 2009), the implementation of the Individual Education Plan (Rahman, 2014; Hajarat & Alias, 2017) and parents collaborative practise (Khalid & Yasin, 2013). Thus, the objective of this study is to identify the level of involvement of parents in the implementation of the transition programmes according to the six elements of parental involvement contained in the Epstein Model framework. In addition, the researchers also want to examine whether there is a significant relationship between the level of parents' education and the level of parental involvement in the implementation of career transition in schools.

#### *Literature Review*

The success of a planned program will not happen by itself but is a result of the integration of cooperation between various parties. Planning the implementation of a good career transition program requires a high degree of collaboration. Collaborative practice between all parties is an important element that has become a success factor for a transition program (Pleet-Odle *et al.*, 2016). Parents' involvement in the transition program should be paid more attention since they are the closest individual to the student. However, there are obstacles to involving parents in the implementation of career transition programs as most parents are busy with their daily tasks and are less interested to actively participate in the transition program (Landmark, Roberts & Zhang, 2013; Abdullah *et al.*, 2015).

The differences in culture, language, socioeconomics and the parents' education levels could also affect the level of parental involvement (Landmark *et al.*, 2013). Parents are less interested to be engaged in an environment that is not friendly and open to the differences and a diversity of backgrounds that exists. The attitude of respecting the cultural background of their students and their families is one of the elements that need to be taken into account in the process of planning and implementing the transition program (Polloway *et al.*, 2013).

**Table 1. Types of transition program and number of respondent by school**

School	Types of Transition Program	Number of Respondents
A	Aquaculture and batik painting	7
B	Aquaculture and car wash	8
C	Food Manufacturing	8
D	Food Manufacturing	7
Overall		30

In addition, the parents' advocacy skills and their involvement are also influenced by their personality and professional skills that they possess (Rehm *et al.*, 2013).

Besides, some parents think that education is the only teacher's responsibility. Most teachers place extremely high commitment to train and spot suitable career training locations for their students despite having to face various obstacles. In Malaysia, there is no transition service and support groups in secondary school. Most of the transition programmes conducted at schools are solely the initiative of special education teachers at the school (Alias, 2013). Some parents do not only have negative impressions of the teachers but also on the employers. This can be an issue and a real challenge in implementing a career transition programme. According to Sankardas & Rajanahally (2015), parents assume that the employer is not sensitive to the needs of students with special needs and could hardly accept an SSN for employment.

Most parents are unaware of the importance of transitional programs for their children's future (Landmark *et al.*, 2013). In addition, parents and the local communities are also lack information regarding skills programmes conducted at schools (Abdullah *et al.*, 2015). The community also has a tendency to make generalizations regarding persons with disabilities (Zinaida, 2016). The prevalence of the generalizations is to put the assumption that the capabilities and competencies of individuals with special needs are limited.

Other studies have found that parents tend to have low expectations of their child's future. This happens when there is no encouragement from various parties, especially the school. Hence, the level of expectation of parents is something that can be controlled by supporting environmental factors or vice versa. According to Wehman *et al.* (2015), two critical aspects of the transition process are the importance of career training and work experience at the secondary school level and the role of parents putting their expectations on the future of their

children. Parental expectations are found to be related to the achievement of students at secondary school and career achievement after completing schooling. Parents who place high expectations will always strive to provide opportunities and encourage their children to learn to live independently.

## METHOD

This study uses descriptive survey design. The respondents of this study were parents of students with learning disabilities selected through a purposive sampling method. This sampling method is used because the research does not focus on all SSN parents but only SSN parents who were involved with the implementation of career transition programmes in secondary schools. Overall, 30 respondents were selected to complete the questionnaire according to the predetermined period. Questionnaires were answered through online medium over a period of two weeks. Respondents were selected from four high school Integrated Special Education Programs (PPKI) in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan district. All of these schools have implemented career transition programmes for over three years. The details of the relevant information are as in Table 1.

This survey study uses a set of questionnaires that contain 48 items of questions using the five-point Likert scale which is from 'highly disagreeable' to 'strongly agree'. Six constructs of the study variables are parenting, communication, decision-making, learning at home, collaboration with the community and voluntary assistance. Each construct contains eight items to answer. All the items submitted were modified from the Rahman (2014) questionnaire and based on the definition of six elements submitted from Epstein *et al.* (2002) with the support of relevant research findings. The questionnaires were divided into two parts: Part I contains closed questions regarding respondents' demographic information such as age, relationship with students, level of education, income and race. Whereas, part II contains items covering the six constructs of the study variables divided into subdivisions A, B, C, D, E and F to represent each construct. The data obtained from the completed questionnaire were then analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science Version 22 (SPSS) software. The data were analysed descriptively to compare the mean score for each element of engagement. Spearman Correlation test was used to examine the relationship between the level of education and the degree of parental involvement. The reliability analysis done shows that the Cronbach Alpha value is 0.963 and this shows that the items constructed in this questionnaire possess high reliability.

**Table 2. Mean score analysis and standard deviation of each element of parental involvement.**

Involvement Elements	Min	SD	Level
Voluntary Assistance	3.95	0.459	High
Communication	3.78	0.466	High
Learning at Home	3.63	0.486	Moderate
Decision Making	3.51	0.602	Moderate
Collaboration With the Community	3.50	0.623	Moderate
Parenting	3.43	0.561	Moderate
Overall	3.63	0.454	Moderate

**Table 3. Spearman Correlation Analysis between the level of education and the level of parental involvement according to the element of engagement**

Relationship	Education Level		Interpretation
	r	Sig	
Voluntary Assistance	0.369	0.045	Weak
Communication	0.366	0.047	Weak
Learning at Home	0.051	0.788	-
Decision Making	0.240	0.201	-
Collaboration With the Community	0.275	0.142	-
Parenting	0.168	0.376	-
Overall	0.250	0.182	-

Significant at level < 0.05

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Finding

Of the 30 respondents, 60% were mothers, 26.7% were fathers and 13.3% were guardians. In addition, the data also showed that 90% of the survey respondents were Malays followed by 6.7% of Indians and 3.3% of Chinese. For the sociocultural backgrounds, it was found that more than half of the respondents, 70% were from the lowest income group (B40), 23.3% from the middle income group (M40) and 6.7% from the highest income group (T20). The findings of parents' education level also showed that over half of the respondents, 21 (70%), had SPM and STPM level while 6 (20%) undergraduate and one (3.3%) undergraduate level. The remaining 2 (6.6%) hold SRP / PMR and UPSR.

Based on the findings of the mean score in Table 2, the level of parental involvement in the parenting aspect ( $x = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.561$ ), decision making ( $x = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 0.602$ ), learning at home ( $x = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 0.486$ ) and collaboration with the community ( $x = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 0.623$ ) were at moderate level. Meanwhile, the level of parental involvement in the aspect of communication ( $x = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.466$ ) and voluntary assistance ( $x = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.459$ ) were at high level (Konting, 1990).

Based on the strength of correlation coefficient value (Chua, 2013), the findings of the Spearman Correlation Test analysis in Table 3 shows that there is no correlation between the level of education and the level of parental involvement in parenting aspects ( $r = 0.168$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), decision making = 0.240,  $p > 0.05$ ), learning at home ( $r = 0.051$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and collaboration with the community ( $r = 0.275$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). The value of  $p > 0.05$  indicates that there is no significant relationship between the level of parental education and their level of involvement in the four aspects of the engagement. On the other hand, the communication aspect ( $r = 0.366$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and voluntary assistance ( $r = 0.369$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) showed a weak correlation between parent education background and their level of involvement and  $p < 0.05$  showed significant relationship between education level with parental involvement. The relationship shown is a positive linear relationship which means, the higher the level of education, the higher the level of engagement.

## Discussion

### Improve Parenting Knowledge and Awareness Level

The Epstein model clearly defines that the element of parenting refers to helping families with parenting skills, family support, understanding of child development up to adolescent age and providing a home-based environment that supports learning at all ages. It also helps the school in understanding family background, culture and goals for children (Epstein *et al.*, 2002). However, the definition of parenting in the context of this study is that knowledge, skills and support provided by parents on the implementation of career transitions include support for home-based learning and training as well as planning and implementing transition programmes in schools.

The findings show that 19 (63.4%) of respondents have never attended any career-related courses and 20 (66.7%) of them said they have no knowledge of the career transition. However, 24 (80%) respondents stated that they are interested in attending courses related to MBK's career education. This finding shows that parents are keen to know about the implementation of career transition but the absence of exposure to related courses causes parents to have less knowledge of the transition. Parents' involvement in various forms of career transition related courses is an effective initiative to enhance their level of knowledge and awareness. This is in line with the study by Young *et al.* (2016) stating that parents supplied with printed materials and structured training sessions have shown increased knowledge regarding transitional programs and are more likely to take follow-up actions. Meanwhile, Landmark *et al.* (2013) also noted that training and education related transition programs to parents are also very important in enhancing understanding and awareness to further promote their active involvement.

*Improve Parenting and Student Advocacy Skills*

Parents should be made actively involved in planning and decision making. Parental involvement in the decision-making aspect as found in this study is still at moderate level. Hence, efforts towards improving parenting advocacy skills should be emphasized to promote their active involvement in the relevant aspects. The Epstein model suggests that families are involved in participating in school decisions, governance and advocacy activities through school boards or improvement teams, parental committees and organizations (Epstein *et al.*, 2002). Hence, the definition of decision making in the context of this study refers to the involvement of parents in the process of making choices and being involved in making decisions with other parties involved. The findings showed that 27 (90%) respondents were not actively involved in the association of parents of special education students in schools. Percentage of parents involved in RPI meetings (40%) and involved in decision-making regarding their children's transition goals (46.6%) also found to be less satisfactory. However, 29 (96.6%) agree that parents should be open to express their opinions for the benefit of their children's learning. Therefore, the factor of such a situation is that fewer parents are given the opportunity to take part in the discussion process and make decisions especially regarding the planning and implementation of their child transitions. Thus, the school should help parents to be aware of the impact of awareness and expectation on their child's future in assisting the process of achieving the goals and decisions that have been made (Wehman *et al.*, 2015).

Pleet-Odle *et al.* (2016) also emphasize that parents need to understand their role in collaborating in the process of designing a transition program. Parents should also be involved in the decision-making process for example determining the duration of the program to be carried out for their children, the types of activities towards achieving the transition goals and understanding the overall process of implementing the transition programme. Parents should be encouraged to express their views on program evaluations and propose transitional activities to be implemented. The process of sharing information should always happen so that the goals are clearly visible. Parents are a very important source and should be the first individuals to take in the early stages of the discussion (Wehman, 2013).

The school can increase the expectation of parents by documenting the development of their child's skills and learning skills from time to time as well as setting a career target that can be accomplished in conjunction with their own parents and students. In line with efforts to improve the skills and experience of students to be more successful in the community, the school is also advised to increase the allocation of time and resources to form meaningful relationships with the family in the process of implementing the transition program. This

is because the findings reveal that parents have a very strong influence on career choices and become a major source of support for the success of the transitional program that students go through. The planned transitional programme should provide opportunities to educate and empower the advocacy skills of the students with special needs and their families towards creating a level of workmanship that satisfies the impact of the integration environment with the support of other agency systems (Simonsen & Neubert, 2012).

*Fostering Positive Attitude and Positive Relationships with Parents*

Parental involvement in communication aspect in this study was found to be at a high level. Hence, the factors that encourage such a situation are due to an open school environment. This is because the findings show that 80% of respondents agree that friendly and open-minded school climate encourages them to work with the school. The Epstein model emphasizes the aspect of communicating with families about school programs and student progress and the two-way communication channels created between school and home (Epstein *et al.*, 2002). The definition of communication according to the context of this study refers to the process of sharing and dissemination of information which is of a two-way nature between parents and the school through various mediums whether written or verbal.

Landmark *et al.* (2013) also emphasize the positive attitude of teachers in building good and continuous relationships and this can also increase the level of parental involvement. The proposed form of encouragement is to create comfort as parents are more likely to engage when they feel more comfortable with the good environment and services provided. Additionally, good relationships between teachers and parents will further enhance parental involvement with the overall transition process. This is in line with the findings of the study by Khalid & Yasin (2013) which states that teachers' communication skills play a role in promoting the involvement of parents and communities in the school. Interpersonal communication between teachers and parents should take place in a harmonious environment in order to provide comfort to them to establish collaboration with teachers.

*Parents Train Children's Skills at Home*

The findings also show that 83.3% of respondents agreed that parents' help at home could assist towards achieving the goals of their children's transition through encouragement in conducting day-to-day activities independently as well as guidance in the aspect of mastery of social skills in everyday life. This is how the Epstein Model recommends that families are involved with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other

curriculum-related activities. Teachers are encouraged to design homework that allow students to share and discuss interesting assignments (Epstein *et al.*, 2002). But the definition of home-based learning in the context of this study is that parents are involved in guiding children to continue the skills and knowledge learned at school as a form of reinforcement. Parents also train SSNs to conduct daily routines independently and involve children with community activities to improve their advocacy, social and communication skills.

Parents are also encouraged to train certain skills, especially soft skills through day-to-day activities at home and identify family members or neighbours who can be a source of support to help train their children in certain aspects of the skills. Soft skill refers to a skill, talent or skill and it can be said as personal skills such as positive and interpersonal skills such as being able to interact with others (Pleet-Odle *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, the mastery of well-established self-management skills at secondary school level is essential. Students with special needs who can master self-management skills will enable them to work better in the community (Simonsen & Neubert, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The Epstein model has provided clear guidance on elements that can enhance the level of parental involvement and can be applied in the context of implementing the SSN career transition programme. The findings of this study show that parenting, decision-making, home-based learning and community-based collaboration need to be addressed to increase the level of moderate engagement to a better level. Obviously, parents have positive awareness and perception in establishing cooperation with the school. Hence, the school should plan appropriate approaches and strategies towards making full use of the role and contribution of parents. The findings of this study clearly show that the implementation of a career transition program in schools can be pursued in accordance with the Epstein Model approach. All suggested elements of engagement can serve as a guide towards further improving the level of parental involvement. The initiative towards creating this active involvement of parents is necessary because they are very important individuals in determining the success of a career transition programme. If this parent's involvement can be improved then it is believed that the implementation of a transition program will be more effective. The effect is very positive for the future of the student itself to survive as a more self-reliant person.

Suggestions for initiatives to provide information to parents using various approaches and medium can be considered by the school. The information provided is about the services provided to their children after leaving school, employment incentives, further

education and so on. The delivery of this information can be done through the distribution of brochures, transitional programs related websites, providing a list of relevant agency telephone numbers and helping to refer parents to a particular organization (Pleet-Odle *et al.*, 2016).

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