

Internship in the Transition Program from School to Work

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Abstract

The transition program from school to work is a program designed specifically for special needs students. The program provides training activities and internships at actual workplaces for the trainees to gain working experiences. The internship at the actual workplace plays an important role in providing the transition program trainees to experience the working life as an employee. The objective of this study was to identify the importance of internship in the transition program for special needs trainees. Therefore, three students with learning disabilities in this study were specially selected and trained for the transition program at their respective schools by their teachers. They have the capability to learn the working and coping skills needed for the six-week internship at actual workplaces. All the trainees were observed by the teachers and also the employers throughout the six-week of internship on their behaviour adapting to the working environment. At the end of the internship, the trainees showed positive changes in their social behaviors and communication skills. They were also able to manage their emotional and social issues thus helping them to function efficiently and independently throughout the internship.

Keywords: transition, working experience, school to work, internship

Introduction

Being able to work and earn a living after leaving the school system, would be a challenge for the individuals with learning disabilities. Some of them, have difficulties in acquiring the basic skills such as to understand or even read simple sentences. They also have difficulties

to listen actively, to speak meaningfully and to convey ideas verbally or in writing (Ju et al. 2012). Thus, they were labeled as individuals who were not able to function independently in their everyday lives but also face difficulties to function accordingly to the working environment.

In special education programs for students with learning disabilities, living skills as well as pre vocational or vocational skills are among the subjects taught in schools. Some of the working skills taught in school were cleaning and washing clothes, washing and polishing cars, and also keeping the classroom clean (sweeping the floor, dusting the furniture). It was part of the learning activities in the pre-vocational and vocational classes. Although the students have learning disabilities, but with consistent and systematic training program, they were able to acquire the skills and carried out the assigned tasks successfully. Thomas and Dykes (2011) agreed that students who have difficulties in reading, writing and calculating simple operation of arithmetic would be able to go for internship after participating in learning activities and training of the working skills provided by the transition program in their schools. Not only, they have acquired the working skills, they were also taught how to manage their social and emotional issues that they might face at their respective workplaces.

Transition from school to work

The transition program from school to work for students with learning disabilities is essential as it gives opportunity for these students to learn and acquire the working skills needed before the internships at the actual workplace. Transition program was defined as a coordinated set of activities for a special needs students,

designed within and outcome-oriented process that promoted movement from school to out-of-school activities (Shogren & Plotner 2012). This transition program is a multidimensional as it involves various important areas such as employment, education, independent living and community inclusion (Sarah et al. 2003). Similarly, Ecaterina and Trian (2012) defined transition from school to work is about choices, career options, living and social arrangement, economic options that may have long consequences in one's life.

Furthermore, special education school and vocational rehabilitation services focus on the transition of youth and adolescents with special needs by training them with vocational skills and referring them to suitable internship and jobs (Jahoda et al. 2008, Rutkowski et al. 2006, King et al. 2005). These students are not only trained the necessary working skills but also the knowledge of the safety aspects in the working environment. They were also taught about the importance of social interactions and communication skills during the internships with the co-workers, employers and even customers. The program also emphasized on coping with emotional and behavior issues and the acceptable and expected behavior during the internships.

According to Leconte (2006) training should be conducted in an effort to help students mastering the necessary skills, including making modifications to suit the students' special needs and abilities. The planning of the transition program should take into account that the pre-vocational training need to be tailored to the needs and demands of the employers involved in the program, including finding suitable places for internships which is an important component of the transition program. The objective of the internship is to provide exposure to the actual work environment for the trainees, thus learning through experience would give the trainees the opportunities to apply their working skills.

The placement of trainees in a real work environment after being trained in school is a transition process that open the opportunity for trainees with learning disabilities in gaining job experience with pre-vocational skills, social skills and daily life skills (Meese 2001) that they had learned at schools. Even though, these trainees have acquired the working skills needed but without the internship they wouldn't be able to practice and apply their skills accordingly. Because of this gap, the working skills that they have acquired would be a waste. Therefore, internship is very important to expose the students to the real working environment in order to adapt and work successfully at the actual workplace after being given proper training (Etscheidt 2006).

Internship

The objective of the internship is to provide working experiences in the real working environment. The process of transferring the trainees from the school environment to the working environment is part of the transition program activities in special education. The internships would give opportunities to the trainees with learning disabilities to experience working as part of working readiness. It also prepared them to be mentally, physically, socially and emotionally ready to start working at the actual work places. Therefore, the candidate for internship program was selected based on the criteria that meet the employer's requirements and also the ability to function as an employee during the internship (Leconte 2006). Getting along with co-workers and adapting to new surrounding were two important elements for employability skills expected from employees with disabilities (Ju, Zhang & Pacha 2012). The employability skills are crucial in applying for jobs as it is the characteristics that the employer seek when they are hiring new employees.

In the program, effective intervention activities for appropriate working behaviors needed to be applied as well as mechanisms to address new situations in working environment

later (Carter et al. 2006). Although these trainees faced difficulties in mastering the basics of reading, calculating and writing skills, but they could be trained to do simple tasks to achieve the expected level of efficiency. According to Lindstrom and colleagues (2011) the working experience at the actual workplace provided trainees with the opportunity to acquire skills as well as critical working behaviors. The trainees were not only learned about teamwork, but also responsibility and work ethics. This is a good opportunity to be working and experiencing the real-world of employment which includes the process of adapting to a new environment successfully and the capability to function as productive workers at the workplace. The work experience gained from the internship would also lead to job opportunities after the trainees graduated from the secondary school (Lindstrom et al. 2011). Hence, the transition program from school to work is a process of preparing the special needs trainees with work readiness before leaving school and joining the workforce.

Methodology

The objective of this case study was to identify the importance of internship in the transition program. The trainees selected for the transition program were based on their abilities to learn and acquire the needed working skills. They also must possess the capability to cope challenges faced during the internships at the actual working environment. During the training session, the aspect of social and emotional behaviors were given full attention in order to teach the coping mechanism if the trainees encountered some related issues during the internships. The trainees were taught the rules, regulations and procedures that they should be aware during the internships. They were also trained not only the skills required by the employers but also the skills to manage their social and emotional issue that might occur at the beginning of the internships. In addition, the trainees were taught and trained to be able to interact and communicate with their co-workers

and employers so that they could address any issues faced while working at the workplace. After three weeks of intensive training at schools, the trainees were sent to their respective workplaces for their internships.

All the trainees were observed by the teachers and also the employers throughout the six-week of internships. At the beginning of the internships, the teachers assisted the trainees to adapt to the new surroundings. Once the trainees were comfortable with a new working settings and able to function independently, the presence of the teachers at the workplaces were reduced occasionally. Each of the trainees was assigned to a co-worker as their mentors. The mentors took over the teachers' role in assisting the trainees socially and emotionally throughout the internships.

Before the transition programs were implemented, the teachers had to obtain the permission to involve the trainees from their parents. After the parents agreed to allow their sons to participate in the programs, they were briefed on the objectives of the programs and the importance of social and emotional supports for their children throughout the programs. The trainees also had to sign a contract about completing the internships and abiding the rules and regulations at the workplaces. The teachers also briefed and explained to the co-workers and employers about the trainees' disabilities, abilities, attitudes, social skills, and personalities. It is important for the co-workers and employers to understand the strengths, weaknesses and also the trainees' characters and issues that might arise during the internships. These knowledge would be a great help in building good rapport for teamwork and assisting the trainees to work efficiently during the internships.

The Trainees

Trainee A, who was a 16 year-old student, was trained to work at a food stall selling chicken rice. At the beginning of the internship, he

was assigned to work only for two hours in the afternoon after school. However, after working for a week, the employer asked the trainee to work from 4pm to 10 pm every day. The employer also agreed to give allowance of RM40-RM60 per day accordingly.

Trainee B, who was also a 16 year-old student was placed at a grocery shop as a shop assistant. He only worked for 2 hours on every Monday and Wednesday afternoon. Trainee B was also given an allowance of RM120 at the end of the internship.

Trainee C was a 17 year-old student who was trained to work at a car wash center near his house. His working schedule was 3 days in a week (Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays) from 2-6 pm with an allowance RM15 per day.

All the trainees were students with learning disabilities. They have limited basic academic skills but they have acquired the level of efficiency in the working skills that qualified them for internships. The trainees also have communication difficulties and uncomfortable in having social interactions.

Table 1: The trainees' demography

Trainee	Age	Gender	Workplace	Working Hours
A	16	Male	A Food Stall	4-10pm everyday
B	16	Male	A Grocery Shop	3-5pm Monday and Wednesday
C	17	Male	A Carwash	2-6pm Tuesday, Thursday and Friday

Findings

The three teachers involved in this transition program were very dedicated in ensuring that the trainees successfully completed the internships in six weeks. The co-workers and employers also gave their full cooperation during the internships. The feedback from observations and interviews of employers, co-workers and customers were analyzed manually

to identify the importance of internship in the transition programs. From the interviews and observation this study found that the internships had achieved its objective in providing students with the opportunity to experience working in the actual workplace. The study also identified the challenges faced by the trainees throughout the internships and positive changes displayed by the trainees after the internship ended.

Challenges faced by the trainees at the beginning of internship

In the transition program, not only the trainees were trained to acquire the working skills needed, but they were also taught to cope their social and emotional issues that they might face during the internships. As expected, at the beginning of the internships, all the trainees felt uncomfortable and found it difficult to adjust and accept the new routine at the workplaces. The trainees needed some time to adjust to the working hours, complete the tasks given and even interact with co-workers and customers. It was a big challenge for the trainees as they have never been working before. Therefore for the first week, the teacher were at the workplaces to help the trainees adjusting to the working setting. The teachers' presence gave the emotional supports that needed by the trainees. The teachers only come to assist the trainees when they were struggling in facing problems or adapting to the new surroundings during the first week of internships. The teachers' also help the co-workers and employers to understand the trainees' emotional, social and behavior characteristics that need prompt attention if the trainees displayed unacceptable behaviors during the internships.

During the peak hours, when there were many customers, Trainee A was stressed as he couldn't handle the demands and pressure of taking orders from customers. Therefore, it was decided that Trainee A would clear the table and was the dishes during the peak hours. When there were less customer, he would be assigned back to take orders from the customers.

Trainee B also faced emotional issue, as he refused to take instructions from strangers (customers). He kept avoiding customers that walked into the shop. He was also easily upset when he was urged or prompted to do the given task immediately. He displayed a negative attitude when he was asked to do tasks that he didn't like such as sweeping the floor and wiping dust off the displayed items on the shelves.

Trainee C had difficulties in communication as he was a very quiet person and keep to himself most of the time. At the beginning of the internship, he had difficulties in understanding and following the instructions given by the co-workers that were related to the tasks needed to be done immediately. Trainee C was constantly ignoring the co-workers and did the task as he pleased. He also got upset then the instructions given had to be repeated slowly for several times before he finally understood and did the tasks correctly.

Positive changes after the internship

At the end of the transition program, Trainee A has expressed his gratitude for giving him the opportunity to work at the food stall. He also learned new things such as preparing the drinks and helping out in the kitchen when he was free. In addition, the trainee had adapted to the working environment and also overcome his fear of interaction with people. He was happy to be able to overcome his fear of socializing and had made friends with some of the regular customers of the stall. After the internship, trainee A was proud to share his experience working at the food stall with his special needs peer.

As for Trainee B, he finally enjoyed his internship and overcome his shyness. He confidently communicating with co-workers and customers at the grocery shop. He was seen smiling while confidently attending to the customers' needs in the shop without any assistance from his co-workers. Trainee B had managed to overcome his difficulties in

communication and would seek help from co-workers if he faced any problems completing his tasks. Towards the end of the internship, he was excited when he was given the responsibility to be in-charge of the cash register. The trust given by the employer has increased his self-esteem and he enjoyed his internship very much. As he was efficiently completing his tasks and successfully managing communication difficulties, the employer decided to employ him as a permanent assistant at the shop. Unfortunately, due to the transportation problem, the trainee had to decline the offer even though he would like very much to continue working there. The trainee house was 25 kilometers from the shop. During his internship, it was the teacher's responsibility to send the trainee to the shop and brought him back home.

At the end of trainee C's internship, he was capable to accept and understand instructions without any repetition. He was able to perform the tasks assigned to him efficiently. He was no longer feel reserved and had wonderful time interacting with co-workers while washing the cars. He also had overcome his shyness and able to socialize not only with the customers but also his peers at school. In fact, the trainee's self-esteem has increased that he bravely offered to help and teach his special needs peers the proper techniques to wash cars at his school's car wash project. The experience working during the internship at the car wash center has also given him the confidence that without any hesitation he pointed out to the teacher who was in-charged of the car wash project, the right way to polish a car. Trainee C also was grateful that he was involved in the transition program and able to complete his internship successfully at the car wash center.

Discussion

Internship is an important part of the transition program from school to work. The internship program has given a lot of benefits to the trainees with learning disabilities as they gained working experiences at actual workplaces. Although

there were some issues faced by the trainees, but towards the end of the internships, the trainees were able to overcome the problems and successfully proved that they were able to work independently and efficiently. Positive interactions with co-workers in the workplace also helped to establish the valuable relationship in the working setting and ultimately lead to career advancement (Lindstrom et al. 2011).

The awareness of the trainees' special needs in the working setting is crucial as the employers were responsible to provide suitable and sufficient working surroundings that meet the trainees' needs (Aliza 2013, Mohd Zulkarnain & Aliza 2017). Hence the employers should take immediate action if the trainees' faced any difficulties in functioning whether socially or emotionally during the internships. The internship also provided the employers the knowledge of the trainees' learning disabilities and that they were able to function effectively if they were given suitable training program (Lindstrom et al. 2011) and continuous guidance from the teachers and co-workers.

Although at the beginning of the internships, all the trainees faced problems in adapting to the working environment such as communicating with co-workers and completing the tasks given (Aliza 2014) but with the support and encouragement from the teachers, co-workers and employers, the trainees continued to participate in the program and finally completed the term of internship successfully. This is because the learning activities during the training at schools had prepared the trainees the knowledge and skills needed for their internships. The internship was not only provided the real exposure to workplace environment but also had an impact on the trainees' social and working behavior. Due to the adequate training of the working skills needed and coping skills on social and emotional issue during the training program at schools. The trainees were no longer feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when interacting with peers, teachers and strangers even after the internships. They also understood the concept

of working and earn a living when they were given the allowance of the internships.

The work experiences that the trainees have gained through the experiential learning during the internships at the actual work places have successfully increased their self-esteem, self-confident to work independently and also overcome their difficulties in social interactions. The internship has successful improved the trainees' social interactions and provided positive and adequate changes in their social and working behavior. With the positive effects of the program on the trainees' personal attribute and working experiences, Yaeda and Jindal-Snape (2011) added that the working or vocational skills were best learned in the real working settings.

Finally the awareness of the importance of rules and regulations help the trainees to display the expected work ethics such as personal integrity and honesty because these are valued as employability skills by the employers (Ju et al. 2012) including the ability to communicate which is one of the important employability skills. During the period of internships, all the trainees' managed to overcome their difficulties in communicating which was improved tremendously with the encouragement from the co-workers and employers. Without the communication barriers, the trainees performed effectively especially during executing tasks that needed teamwork.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the internship at the actual workplace has provided the platform for the trainees with learning disabilities not only to experience real working life but also to build their capabilities that meet the requirements and demands of the employers. These positive impacts on the trainees' development would also help them acquire the employability skills that are essential in the workforce.

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