



Enhancing Academic Competence for Students with Disabilities: A School Review of the Post School Transition Program

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ABSTRACT

High school leavers generally expect to be accepted into higher education. For graduate students with disabilities (SWD), however, entering college remains an exception. This study aims to identify the academic barriers to learning and the strategic preparation needed for college admission. The study was conducted in 12 special education high schools in Central Java, Indonesia. A questionnaire and focus group discussion with the school teachers were employed to collect data on the transition programme activities of the respective schools. The questionnaire was self-reported by the school staff, who consisted of headmasters, teachers, and administrators, while the interview was used to elicit the academic barriers that students with disabilities encounter within their respective special schools. The data were analysed using both descriptive quantitative and qualitative measures. It was found that 1) students with disabilities interfere with both internal and external barriers to learning; 2) policies on the right to education provide meaningful assistance in the university enrolment of students with disabilities; and 3) the modified curriculum and instructional strategies are best employed with a variety of extra curricular activities. The research concludes that academic post school transition makes a major contribution to college admission for those with mild disabilities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For SWD, pursuing study at college involves facing milestones of struggling efforts for the success of their post-school transition. There are at least three areas of challenges that SWD have to overcome in the post-school transition programme, ranging from barriers to learning for those with disabilities, to school barriers to the transition programme, and adaptation barriers to college.

The first of these, barriers to learning, originate as an internal problem among individuals with disabilities who face learning difficulties due to their handicaps (Fullarton & Duquette, 2016). Entering university is already daunting for students without disabilities (Gilbert & Hay, 2004), let alone for students with disabilities graduating from special schools. According to Winn and Hay (2009), those with disabilities have less motivation and face difficulties in showing initiative and concentrating. Low self-esteem and feeling of embarrassment due to the label of having lower learning capacity often cause reluctance to show up the positive opinions of the class (Gunarhadi, Mustapa, & Abdull Sukor, 2014). Depending on the severity of their handicap, students with learning disabilities will, for instance, face different experiences compared to those with visual impairment. The students of struggling learners seem to face the hardest competition in university entrance tests. It is therefore recommended that universities prepare teachers with in-service education programmes to increase their knowledge of such students before enrolment (Winn & Hay, 2009). They need even stronger power to face adversity in order to achieve success (Staltz, 2004). Under the specific priority of the post-school transition programme targeted at individuals' special needs, such barriers could be reduced accordingly. For the transition programme to be effective, assessment should be available before intervention commences.

In addition to internal barriers, students with disabilities are faced with the curriculum in respect of overloaded school works. The heavy burden often makes them drop out due to their failure to complete their

studies. Pyle and Wexler (2012) state that dropping out is a manifestation of the barriers to the progress of students with disabilities. In their research, they found that 65% of students with disabilities failed to finish high school. Plank and Condliffe (2013) comment that students with disabilities feel a heavy burden in coping with the crowded curriculum delivered by teachers. Other research by Cobb and Alwell (2009) also reports that students with disabilities obtain less benefit from homework. Instead, they prefer to take part in activities that enhance their interest and talents.

Finally, adaptation to new accommodation is also another problem for those entering college. Lawson and Shields (2014) explain that students with disabilities could experience external problems that affect their psychological comfort. One of these is perceived negative attitudes. At college, the professors' attitude towards accommodation is a critical point in determining the success of students with a lower standard of learning (Fullarton & Duquette, 2016). People may assume that students with disabilities are not able to perform certain required academic tasks as well as those without disabilities. This situation often occurs in inclusive schools, where students with disabilities have to take on equal academic responsibilities to their peers of the same age. On the other hand, barriers may also be presented by parents and siblings in terms of overprotection. They may not trust their children's abilities, even if they have already made an effective transition. In addition, they may not let their children stay away for work or study, even when they are ready for independent living. In the job setting, for instance, young people with disabilities often feel uneasy about receiving the same level of wages. In research by Kidd, Sloan and Ferk (2002, p. 53), it was found that even when the transition program has been effective, youth with disabilities may face barriers in their working environment (Lawson & Shields, 2014).

In the case of post-school transition, strategies to overcome barriers are likely to differ from one school to another, depending on the type of school where the students with disabilities are studying. Some schools provide help to graduates of high schools by providing transition planning for those with disabilities, both for their further studies, and through vocational enhancement in the form of individual learning plans (ILPs). On the other hand, in an inclusive school with mainstream students with disabilities, a diversified curriculum delivered through differentiated instruction systems may be much more appropriate (Gregory & Chapman, 2007; Salim, Gunarhadi, & Anwar, 2015).

It seems that special schools in Indonesia make use of the national curriculum standardised by the National Board of Education under the Ministry of Education and Culture. These schools are formal institutions that provide educational services for certain categories of handicapped conditions, and are run separately from regular schools. This is the reason why the curriculum for special schools is different from that of regular schools, and so is the standard. Standard achievement in these schools should fit individual needs and capabilities, which are primarily life skill-oriented. Such orientation refers to the history of special schools, going back to the 1900s. This curriculum was first 65% vocational and 35% academic. Subsequently, the practical mode of instruction placed more emphasis on life skills (Directorate of Special Education, 2013).

The aim of this study is to identify the academic barriers faced by SWD during the learning process. It also aims to develop strategies to prepare them for college enrolment.

2. METHOD

The research was conducted using a survey involving 12 special schools in Central Java, Indonesia. The participants consisted of 12 school principals, 36 teachers, 12 school administrators, and 51 special needs students with various disabilities. Data were collected through a self-reported questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire was used to gather information about school policies regarding the academic transition programme, while the interviews were conducted to explore the problems faced by students. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyse the questionnaire data, while the interviews were analysed qualitatively to strengthen the quantitative data.

3. RESULTS

Barriers to college enrolment

The interviews with the SWD revealed that they experienced barriers to college enrolment related to their disabilities and psychological aspects. Their disabilities were felt to be barriers to the learning process in class. Furthermore, psychological aspects included insecurity in participating in college enrolment, lack of self-

efficacy, lack of motivation, feeling embarrassed to compete with regular students, underachievement, feeling anxious and fear of college life. An explanation of these barriers is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Barriers to College Enrollment

Barrier	Number of SWD	Percentage
Student's disability	51	100%
Insecurity in participating in college enrolment	47	92%
Lack of self-efficacy	40	78%
Lack of motivation	39	76%
Feeling embarrassment when competing with regular students	26	51%
Underachievement	25	49%
Feeling anxious	12	23%
Fear of college life	11	22%

School policies regarding post-school transition programmes

There are two types of post-school transition programmes in special schools, academic and vocational. School policies regarding the post-school academic transition programme are preceded by assessment of levels of intelligence (IQ scores), cognitive abilities, and the literacy and arithmetic abilities of students. Assessment is conducted by a team formed at the school (teachers), with recommendations from other experts (e.g., medical experts and psychologists), and with participation by parents. Furthermore, the school will modify the curriculum according to the type of disorder, the student's abilities, and individualised programmes. Details of the school policies on the post-school academic transition programme can be seen in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Assessment of students'abilities

Types of Assessment	Number of Special Schools	Percentage
IQ scores	12	100%
Cognitive abilities	10	83%
Literacy and arithmetic abilities	11	92%

Table 2 shows that all the participants (12 special schools, 100%) applied the policy to assess students' IQ scores before implementing the academic transition programme. Furthermore, 10 special schools (83%) assessed students' cognitive abilities and 11 (92%) assessed their literacy and arithmetic abilities. These figures indicate that the assessment of IQ scores is the most important step before implementing the academic transition programme. Based on the results of the assessment of these three aspects, the schools implement the policy that individuals with intellectual disabilities are advised to follow a vocational transition programme, rather than an academic one.

Table 3. Implementation of the curriculum in academic transition programmes

Type of Curriculum	Number of Special Schools	Percentage
National	7	58%
Modified	4	33%
Individualised	1	8%

Based on Table 3, seven out of the 12 special schools implemented the National Curriculum from the Ministry, four (33%) used a modified curriculum, and one special school (8%) utilised an individualised educational plan. In short, the majority of the schools make use of the National Curriculum, followed by a modified curriculum.

Special schools' strategies in academic transition programmes

Table 4. Special schools' strategies in academic transition programmes

Barriers	Number of Special Schools	Percentage
Conducting enrichment learning	12	100%
Increasing study time	12	100%
Bringing in certain subject teachers from other schools	7	55.8%
Taking tutoring at institutions	6	50%
Taking private tutoring	6	50%
Collaborating with colleges	4	33%

In order to overcome the barriers faced by SWD, the special schools implement several strategies in the academic transition programme. These include conducting enrichment learning in preparing students who decide to enrol at the college, increasing study time, bringing in certain subject teachers from other schools, providing tutoring at other institutions, providing private tutoring, and collaborating with colleges. An breakdown of these strategies can be seen in Table 4.

4. DISCUSSION

Barriers to college enrolment

Graduating from school is commonly celebrated as a happy moment for students in general. In almost the same way for those with special needs, graduating from a special school is also a special moment. However, thinking about the future is something that is worrying for most for students with disabilities and their parents. Especially those interested in pursuing further study, competition is the hardest challenge for such students. It has been shown that such hard competition is daunting even for brilliant graduates (Gilbert & Hay, 2004). There are several reasons why graduates with disabilities are worried about the college entrance test. The first is individual psychological factors, concerned mainly with self-concept and motivation. As noted by Winn and Hay (2009 p.53) by Lawson and Shields (2014), having a disability means losing some degree of motivation, initiative, and concentration on tasks and responsibilities. As evidence, the research found that students with disabilities became frustrated more often when doing important jobs because of their low expectation of achievement. Another study found that students with disabilities often experience feelings of embarrassment as underachievers, mainly caused by low self-esteem (Gunarhadi, Kassim, & Shaari, 2014). With regard to post-school transition, therefore, special schools are required to provide a counsellor or psychologist for individual assistance in promoting the students' self-concept and confidence before college admission. In line with this, Winn and Hay (2009) suggest that effective post-school transition programmes aimed at individuals with disabilities could reduce soft skill barriers, such as communication and the ability to deal with criticism.

Policies regarding post-school transition programmes

a. National policies on the right to education

Policies on the education in nature are designed to facilitate those with disabilities to have an equal opportunity to education at the basic level as well as higher education. For graduates with disabilities, such policies make a meaningful contribution to their expectations of a better life. Particularly for those with high expectations of having the opportunity to study further in higher education, the policies open the door to their competition for enrolment. Therefore, they encourage graduates with disabilities to achieve at university level. As found by Synder and Dillow (2015), the number of undergraduate students with various disabilities enrolling in higher education has tended to grow over time. Research reported by the US Department of Labor showed that 2.5 million (11%) of undergraduate students were identified as having a disability.

This number of students with disabilities at university varies in terms of the category of handicap. Leake (2015) found that variations occurred due to the fact that some students with disabilities enrolling at university do not self-identify a disability. Furthermore, these students fail to reveal their disability status in the self-reported data for various reasons. In some universities, however, self-identification is not an issue because of the equal opportunity to study in higher education. Riddell and Weedon (2014) note that mentioning a disability is a matter of choice due to potential labeling. In contrast to this argument, self-identification might be necessary for appropriate accommodation and other learning services to be allocated on campus. Self-identity might be required during the admission process in relation to practical assistance, especially when students, for instance, take the entrance test or require other campus orientation. Students with visual disability may need different assistance compared to those who are hearing impaired, or have physical disabilities or autism. In short, thanks to the policy, high school graduates with disabilities will have a better opportunity to have equal access to tertiary education.

b. *University policies regarding post-school transition programmes.*

The policies on equal access to higher education for graduates with disabilities are based on the Education Act No. 20/2003 on the National Education System, which states that every person has the right to quality education. This means, without exception, that those with disabilities are addressed by the act. In 2014, this was followed by two different regulations: the first issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture No. No.46/2014 on Special Education in Tertiary Education for person with disabilities; and the second by the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education No. 46/2017, stating that those with disabilities have the right to tertiary education (Asep, Yusuf, Budiyanto, Azizah, & Ridwan, 2017). The impact of these rules has contributed to the increasing number of graduates with disabilities enrolling in higher education, and also to the outcome of post-school transition programmes (Miglone, Timmons, Butterworth, & Lugas, 2012).

Since the issuance of these two regulations, more and more graduates from special schools have become interested in enrolling for further study at universities. In 2017, it was noted that there were 401 students with disabilities across 152 universities, a figure which indicates that on average there were two or three students with disabilities in each university in Indonesia. Research by Gunarhadi, Yusuf, Subagya, Moh Hanafi, & Tahar (2019) found that 12 out of 29 graduates were accepted at one university. This means that there was an increase from three to 12 graduates with disabilities who could be accepted in higher education. Regarding the performance of special schools, there are at least two points that need to be considered in managing post-school transition programmes, namely assessment and the process of the learning experience among the students during their school years. Despite performance assessment of learning acquisition as mentioned in general senses (Hairida & Yunanto, 2018), assessment in special education lies before intervention. No matter what the assessment is for, Pierangelo and Giuliani (2008) emphasise the urgency of assessment as the potential elicitation of learning in the school setting. In high school of special schools, assessment is prior to intervention. In this context, school staff are required to conduct academic assessment in terms of intelligence, cognitive abilities, and arithmetic, in addition to vocational interests. Such tests are not meant to select eligible students to be accepted in the respective schools; rather, it is recommended to use prescriptive assessment in order to provide appropriate learning placement and treatment programmes for children during their school years (Pennington, 2009). Furthermore, it is essential that the assessment tools meet validity requirements. Unfortunately, this research is beyond the scope of this topic (Gunarhadi et al., 2019)

The learning process for the sake of post-school transition programmes to achieve the objective of academic achievement (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013), especially when it is prepared for higher education degrees. Gibson and Hasbrouck (2008) recommend that the standard curriculum and teaching strategy should be modified when used for students with disabilities. Or else such students Gregory and Chapman (2007) also believe that the regular curriculum is never appropriate for struggling learners, as is the case in special schools. When confirming this with the classroom teachers, one stated that *"the implementation of the curriculum is of no meaning without modification"*. This means that the teachers always modify the teaching materials to make the instruction meaningful to the students' ways of learning.

From the focus group discussion, it was found that the proportion of academic content was too low (30%) compared to the vocational load (70%). This means that the curriculum could support the success of graduate students in competing for higher education places. When asked about the shortcomings of the curriculum, the Head Master in charge of the curriculum commented *"the balance between the academic and vocational load of the material is not ideal; I mean the students need a longer time to prepare for the college entrance test"*. In short, an individual basis of instruction seems to be of better use for students' success in learning (Ormrod, 2011; Woolfolk, 2013). In addition to classroom intervention, there should be more learning activities that can be initiated in the extra time outside of the school day.

Special schools' strategies in academic transition programmes

Various activities are provided by the special schools to prepare students to be able to compete with other non-disabled graduates from regular schools. Hard skills such as extra learning activities, the involvement of parents, and inviting teachers for extra training are clearly needed by graduate students with disabilities.

Enrichment programmes would be suitable for highly intelligent students. Students with visual impairments or physical disabilities would probably learn faster than they may need an enrichment programme which is focused on, and meaningful for, their further study. Those with intellectual disabilities probably need remedial teaching or other functional activities in order to improve their life skills. In addition to hard skills, soft skills learnt from psychological training by smart counsellors turns to be more than physical and cognitive learning. Soft skills refer to the ability that functions as a source of energy, which will powerfully counteract the adversity of learners, allowing them to achieve success among those with special needs (Stoltz, 2004).

5. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, the following conclusions are drawn.

1. Students graduating from special schools face various barriers to a college education. The challenges may come from their internal limitations such as cognitive incompetence, low self-concept, lack of motivation, lack of self-efficacy, anxiety, and fear of college life. To help them, the special schools need to provide diversified educational services by making use of curriculum diversification, and differentiated instructional strategies on an individual basis.
2. The power of legislation, particularly the policies on university enrolment, functions as a meaningful facilitator in post-school transition programmes for graduates with disabilities.
3. Above all, for post-transition programmes to be effective, external support is needed to prepare students with disabilities for college life. This external support includes hard skill activities, such as extra learning time, inviting teachers for private learning, and joining try-out programmes.

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