Enhancing Academic Competence for Students with Disabilities: (A School Review on Post School Transition Program)

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Abstract

For high school leavers, to be accepted in higher education is a general expectation. For graduate students with disability (SWD), however, entering to college remains an exception. This study aims to identify the academic barriers to learning and reveal the strategic preparation for college admission. This study was a survey carried out in 12 special high schools in Central Java, Indonesia. Data was collected by means of questionnaire and interview with the staffs where the post school transition program was implemented. The questionnaire was self-reported by the school staffs consisting of headmasters, teachers, and administrators, while the interview was addressed to seek the academic barriers the students with disabilities encounter in their respective special schools. The data were analyzed on both descriptive quantitative and qualitative measures. The research found that 1) students with disabilities interfere with both internal and external barriers of learning, 2) the differentiated instruction was best employed on the students’ need and learning style bases. The research concluded that academic post school transition gave major contribution to the college admission for those with intellectual disabilities.

**Keywords:** Post-school transition; academic barriers; student with disability; special schools; college

# Introduction

For SWD, pursuing study to a college means facing milestones of struggling efforts for the success of the post-school transition. There are at least three areas of challenges coming across the SWD have to overcome in a post-school transition program. The challenges range from disability barriers to learning, school barriers to transition program, and adaptation barriers to college.

The first is disability barriers to learning. These barriers originate as an internal problem among individuals with disabilities who get the learning difficulties due to their handicapping conditions (Fullarton & Duquette, 2016). The fact has indicated that entering university is especially already daunting enough for students without disabilities (Gilbert & Hay, 2004), and let alone, the students with disabilities graduating from special schools. As cited by Winn and Hay (2009), having a disability, a person is found to have less motivation and difficulties showing initiative and concentration on the job. Low self-esteem and feeling of embarrassment due to the label of having lower learning capacity often cause the reluctance to show up the positive opinions of the class (Gunarhadi, Mustapa, & Abdull Sukor, 2014). Depending on the severity of their handicapping conditions, students with learning disabilities, for instance, will face different experience when compared to those with visual impairment. The students of struggling learners seem to face the hardest competition in the university entrance test. It is, therefore, recommended that the university prepares teachers with an in-service education program to increase knowledge for such students before the enrollment (Winn & Hay, 2009). They need an even stronger power of adversity for success (Staltz, 2004). Under the specific priority of a post-school transition program targeted to the individual’s special needs, such barriers could reduce accordingly. For the transition program to be effective, assessment should be available before the intervention commencement.

In addition to the 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 the failure in completing their study. Pyle and Wexler (2012) mentioned that drop out is the manifestation of barriers to the progress of students with disabilities. In their research, they found 65% of those with learning disabilities failed to complete their schooling. Plank and Condliffe (2013) commented that students with disabilities feel the heavy burden to receive the crowded curriculum delivered by the teachers. Another research by Cobb and Alwell (2009) also reported students with disabilities got less benefit from homework. Instead, they prefer having activities that enhance their interest and talents.

Lastly, adaptation to new accommodation is also another problem for those entering college. Lawson & Shields (2014) mentions students with a disability could experience external problems that influence their psychological comfort. One of them is the perceived negative attitude. In college, Professor’s attitude towards accommodations plays an important role in the performance of students with a lower standard of learning (Fullarton & Duquette, 2016). People may assume students with a disability could not perform certain required academic tasks as well as those without disabilities. This case is often happening to inclusive schools where students with disabilities have to take equal academic responsibilities as the peers of the same ages. On the other hand, barriers may also come from the parents and siblings with over protection. They do not trust their children’ abilities even if they already get an effective transition. They do not let the children stay away for work or study even when they are ready for independent living. In the job setting, for instance, youth with a disability working for a company often feel uneasy about getting the same amount of wage from the employer. In research by Kidd, Sloan and Ferk (2002) pp. 53, it was found that even with effective transition program, youth with disabilities may get barriers from their working environment (Lawson, & Shields, 2014).

For the sake of a post-school transition, strategies to overcome such barriers are likely different from one school to another depending on the type of school where students with disabilities study. Some schools facilitate the graduates of the high schools by providing transition planning for students with disabilities both for their further study and vocational enhancement through individual learning plan (ILP). On the other hand, an inclusive school with mainstreamed students with disabilities, diversified curriculum delivered through differentiated instruction system may fit much better (Gregory & Chapman, 2007; Salim, Gunarhadi, & Anwar, 2015).

It seems that special schools in Indonesia make use of national curriculum standardized by the National Board of Standardization under the Ministry of Education. The special school refers to a formal institution that gives educational services a certain category of handicapping condition conducted separately from regular schools. That is why the curriculum for special schools is different from the one in regular schools, and so is the standard. The standard achievement in these schools should fit the individual needs and capability, which is primarily life skill-oriented. Such an orientation is referred to the history of the commencement of Special School back in the 1900s. This curriculum was firstly comprised of 65% vocational: 35% academic loads. Consequently, the practical mode of instruction get more emphasis on the life skills (Directorate of Special Education, 2013).

The aims of this study is to identify the academic barriers for SWD during the learning process. Furthermore, this study also aims to find strategies to prepare SWD for college admission.

# METHOD

This study was conducted using a survey involving 12 special schools in Central Java, Indonesia. Participants of this study consisted of 12 school principals, 36 teachers, and 12 school administrators, and 51 students with special needs from 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 program, while interviews were conducted to explore the problems faced by students. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data from the questionnaire, while qualitative data from the interview were used to strengthen quantitative data.

# results

1. **Barriers to college enrollment**

From the interviews on SWD, students experienced barriers to college enrollment. These barriers include their disabilities and the psychological aspects of students. Their disabilities are felt to be the barriers in the learning process in class. Furthermore, psychological aspects such as insecurity to participate in college enrollment, lack of self-efficacy, lack of motivation, feeling embarassed to compete with regular students, underachiever, feeling anxious and fear of college life. An explanation of these barriers can be seen in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Barriers to College Enrollment

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Barriers | Number of SWD | Percentage |
| Students’ disabilities | 51 | 100% |
| Insecurity to participate in college enrollment | 47 | 92% |
| Lack of self-efficacy | 40 | 78% |
| Lack of motivation | 39 | 76% |
| Feeling embarrassment to compete with regular students | 26 | 51% |
| Underachiever  | 25 | 49% |
| Feeling anxious | 12 | 23% |
| Fear of college life | 11 | 22% |

1. **School policies regarding post-school transition programs**

There are two types of post-school transition programs in special schools, i.e. academic and vocational transition programs. School policies regarding the post-school academic transition program is preceded by assessing the level of intelligence (IQ scores), cognitive abilities, and literacy and arithmetic abilities of students. The assessment was carried out by a team formed at the school (teachers), recommendations from other experties (i.e. medical experts, psychologists, etc.), and parents. Furthermore, the school will modify the curriculum according to the types of disorders, the student abilities, and individualized programs. The results of the school policies on post-school academic transition program can be seen in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Assessment implementation 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 participants (12 special schools, 100%) applied the policy to assess students’ IQ score before implementing academic transition program. Furthermore, 10 special schools (83%) assessed students' cognitive abilities and 11 special schools (92%) assessed students' literacy and arithmetic abilities. These results indicate that the assessment of IQ scores is the most important thing to do before implementing academic transition program. Based on the results of the assessment of these three aspects, the school took a policy that individuals with intellectual disabilities were advised to recommend vocational transition programs, instead academic transition program.

Table 3. Implementation of curriculum in academic transition programs

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Types of Curriculum | Number of Special Schools | Percentage |
| National | 7 | 58% |
| Modified | 4 | 33% |
| Individualized | 1 | 8% |

Based on Table 3, 7 out of 12 special schools implemented the National Curriculum given from the Ministry, 4 special schools (33%) used a modified curriculum, and 1 special schools (8%) applied the individualized curriculum in addition to the modified curriculum. It means, most of the special schools use given curriculum as the main reference. Modified curriculum with a bigger portion of vocational load may be necessary for students with lower cognitive function. Individualized curriculum, additionally, is given to those with dominantly high or low achievement.

1. **Special schools’ strategies in academic transition programs**

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

Table 4. Special schools’ strategies in academic transition programs

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 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 | 558% |
| Taking tutoring at institutions | 6 | 50% |
| Taking private tutoring | 6 | 50% |
| Collaborating with college | 4 | 33% |

**DISCUSSION**

1. **Barriers to college enrollment**

Graduating from any school is commonly celebrated as a happy moment for students in general. In almost the same way as those with special needs, graduating from a special school is also a special moment. However, thinking about what’s next is something that is worrying most for students with disabilities and their parents as well. Especially those interested in pursuing to study further, competition is the hardest challenges for these students. It seems that such a hard competition is daunting enough even for brilliant graduates (Gilbert & Hay,2004).

There are several reasons why graduates with disabilities should be much worried about the college entrance test. The first is a psychological factor of the individual of students. This factor deals a lot to do with self-concept and motivation. As noted in Winn and Hay, 2009 p.53 by Lawson and Shields (2014) that having a disability means losing somewhat degree of motivation, initiative, and concentration on the task and responsibility. As an evidence, the research found that students with disabilities more often get frustrated in doing an important job because of the low expectation towards the achievement. Another study also found that students with disabilities often experience feelings of embarrassment being underachievers that are mainly caused by their low self-esteem (Gunarhadi, Kassim, & Shaari, 2014).

In respect of post-school transition, therefore, the special schools are required to provide a counselor or psychologist for individual assistance in promoting the students’ self-concept and their confidence before the college admission. In line with this purpose, Winn and Hay (2009) suggest that effective post-school transition program addressed to the individuals with disabilities could reduce the barriers of soft skills such as communication and ability to deal with criticism.

1. **School policies regarding post-school transition programs**
2. *Assessment implementation in academic transition programs*

The purpose of the assessment is to get the information on the students potential and interest. In addition type of assessment is functioning as a diagnostic instrument for the academic potential elicitations (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008). It does not mean, at all, to screen the enrollment to the respective school. Instead, it is applied to see the tendency of the children during the school period of the learning process. This assessment also functions to predict the final orientation of skill development of career option upon leaving the schools. Since the coming new students to the special school are all those suspected to have disabilities with various degree of handicapping condition, Pennington (2009) suggests differential diagnostic assessment be used to avoid mislabeling and inappropriate treatment accordingly. However, instead of assessing the child’ weaknesses, positive potentials are highlighted. Therefore, it is important to consider the use of differential assessment in accordance with the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) which is prepared by involving related agents in an interdisciplinary team. A meticulous and authentic assessment resulted from the interdisciplinary team would undoubtedly become the capital source of curriculum and instructional programs for the respective children.

1. *Implementation of curricullum in academic transition programs*

The curriculum is designed and applied for a certain group of learners with the relatively average standard of capabilities to achieve the objectives of the education (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013). Those with below standard capability may need a modified curriculum, and modified curriculum needs differentiated instructional strategies correspondingly (Gibson, & Hasbrouck, 2008). In their book, Gregory and Chapman (2007) also note the importance of diversification when the curriculum is used in groups of heterogeneous learners. “One size does not fit all” implies that it is essentially crucial to diversify the curriculum to correspond to the group of diverse students.

It is important to acknowledge that the curriculum for the special schools in Indonesia is constructed and reconstructed under the reference of the national curriculum. It is firstly designed and is standardized by the National Board of Education Standardization under the Ministry of Education. To plan a post-school transition program, therefore, the curriculum in special schools requires diversification. Furthermore, to adjust the curriculum to college enrollment purposes, diversification is made in such a way through the following aspects; students’academic potential assessment, content and material adjustment, differentiated delivery system, and multi-modal assessment of learning outcome. When confirmed with the classroom teachers, they said *“the implementation of curriculum is of no meaning without modification”*. It means the teacher always modified the teaching materials to make the instruction meaningful to the students ways of learning.

To prepare the students for college education, special schools implement the various curriculum. There are at least three types of the curriculum; a standardized curriculum which is given from Central Government, modified curriculum, and individualized curriculum. To prepare the students particularly for pursuant study, it is crucial to consider the proportion between academic and vocational loads of skills. Instead of 30% academic: 70% vocational loads, now that the focus is on academic purpose. When asked about the shortcoming the curriculum the Head Master in charge of curriculum commented *” the portion between academic and vocational load of material is not ideal, I mean the students need longer time to prepare for college entrance test”*. Henceforth, the portion of academic intention is reversed to 70%. Or else, additional time of learning materials on college test should be well considered (Gregory, & Chapman, 2007). In comparison to the curriculum in inclusive schools where the academic load is paramount, the curriculum for the special schools is more settled in a way that the structure of the content is set up for a somehow less heterogeneous class in term of the students’ characteristics. Unlike an inclusive school where many diverse students are mainstreamed, a class in special schools is a self-contained base in which the class contains students with similar handicapping conditions. A self-contained class for visual impairment, for instance, is only contained students with visual problems with somewhat degree of visual equity differences. In the context of curriculum diversification, modification is emphasized more on the group rather than the individual basis of response to intervention (RTI), though the instruction mode can also be ( Ormrod, 2011; Woolfolk, 2013). Furthermore, when diversification is made on the individual needs, it is believed the curriculum would be much more fruitful regardless of the time consumed.

1. **Special schools’ strategies in academic transition programs**

There are various activities provided by the special schools to prepare the students to be able to compete with other graduates of non-disabled in regular schools. Hard skills such as extra learning activities, involving parents, inviting teachers for extra training are evidently needed by graduating students with disabilities. Enrichment program would fit students with high function in the respect of intelligence. Students with visual impairments or physical disabilities would probably learn faster that they may need an enrichment program which is focused on and meaningful for their further study. Meanwhile, those with intellectual disabilities probably need remedial teaching or other functional activities so as to improve their life skills. In addition to hard skills, soft skill achieved from psychological training by smart counselor s turns to be more than physical and cognitive learning. Soft skills refer to the ability that functions as a source of energy that will evoke powerfully the adversity of learners to achieve thrilling success among those with special needs (Stoltz, 2004).

# Conclusion

From the above discussion, the research draws the following conclusions:

1. Students graduating from special schools face various barriers to a college education. The challenges may come from their internal limitation 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, differentiated instructional strategy on the individual basis.
2. For the post-transition program to be effective, external supports are needed to get these students with disabilities ready for college enrollment. The external supports include hard skill activities such as extra time of learning, inviting teachers for private learning, and joining try-out program.
3. Above all, the power of legislation, particularly on the policy of university enrollment may function as the meaningful facilitator in the post-school transition program for the graduates with disabilities.

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