

PARENTAL AWARENESS ON CAREER PATH FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS STUDENTS: HIGHLIGHTS FROM A NETWORKING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) also referred to locally in Malaysia as MBPK (Murid Berkeperluan Pendidikan Khas) are students requiring educational adaptations due to learning difficulties, disabilities or other developmental needs. Parents' understanding and awareness of the future potential of SEN students remain limited, often constrained by traditional beliefs that their children do not have the same promising future as typical students. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a networking and collaboration program designed to enhance parents' awareness and understanding of the educational and career pathways available to SEN students secondary school graduates in the Kuala Langat district, Selangor. This study employed a quantitative survey approach, supported by qualitative feedback to enrich and contextualize the findings. A career fair and networking event was carried out involving private and governmental agencies as well as education providers. This program was attended by SEN students and their parents. A total of 56 respondents were selected to answer the survey questionnaire at the end of the program. The findings indicate that this program has succeeded in increasing parents' understanding of educational opportunities such as skills certificate programs, as well as industry-to-career training which directly increases parents' confidence in guiding SEN students towards an educational path that is more suitable for their children's interests and abilities after graduating from school. Overall, this study is important in providing a platform for collaboration between schools, parents and post-secondary institutions in helping to shape a more secure direction for their future. This study also suggests the need for more comprehensive programs like these to be held across the nation. The findings may assist policymakers and education practitioners in developing a holistic approach to address the issue as well as improving the special education support system in Malaysia.

Keywords: Networking Program, Parental Awareness, Special Educational Needs (SEN), Career Path, Career Training

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian government has attempted on various occasions to ensure that people with disabilities (PWDs) are given equal employment opportunities. This effort began in school with a compulsory career transition program offered to students with special educational needs (SEN students) at secondary school (Husni & Low, 2024). Yet, according to the Ministry of Human Resources latest statistics, it is evident that PWDs only contribute to 1.3% of the labour force in Malaysia, which is way below the registered population of PWDs (Amin et al., 2024). Thus, career planning and career opportunities for SEN students are still a problematic agenda for the nation, particularly in terms of providing parents with sufficient awareness and understanding of available opportunities. Parent involvement plays a significant role in SEN students to raise academic performance, attendance and socio-emotional development of SEN students itself. Such parent involvement can support SEN students in helping them gain the necessary skills and knowledge to enter career prospects and manage their future accordingly, as pointed out by Eden et al. (2024).

However, there are still a large number of parents who believe that SEN students' career prospects are very limited. This perception is due to limited access to alternatives offered by the government, including vocational training in post-secondary institutions, vocational skills certification programs for disabled people, and work-based learning experiences (Kirby et al., 2019). Parents' lack of exposure to vocational careers compounds this issue, thereby limiting career planning opportunities for SEN students (Tran & Nguyen, 2020). Parents tend to prefer conventional educational routes because of societal pressures, even though non-traditional routes like skills training or supported employment might suit them better (Rehman et al. 2022). In addition, a lack of opportunities for interaction and networking between parents and education stakeholders or post-secondary institutions makes matters worse. SEN students' parents also lack appropriate networks with vocational schools, industry practitioners, and support mechanisms that can ease the career change of their children (Hirano et al., 2018). Parents won't be able to find career options for their kids if they aren't involved.

For its own part, in light of these issues, an education networking program between parents, instructors, and officials of institutions is instrumental to bridge the gap in knowledge. The program enables parents to easily access work-related information, enabling them to make informed decisions about their children's careers and educational potential. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of networking and partnership programs in raising awareness and knowledge about education and career paths for SEN students after schooling. The findings from this study will help guide the improvement of future programs in terms of preparing parents for their children's higher education and career advancement.

Objectives

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of the information delivery mechanism in increasing parents' awareness of SEN students' career paths.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of networking and collaboration programs in increasing parents' confidence in guiding SEN students towards appropriate educational and employment pathways.

3. To assess parents' level of awareness before and after attending networking programs about SEN students' educational and career opportunities, including skills certification programs, industry training, and inclusive education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The knowledge of parent(s) has a profound impact on the transition of students with special needs from high school to either post-secondary education or employment. Durisic and Bunijevac (2017) argue that the lack of parent knowledge informed their inability to provide their children with disabilities with the resources to help them locate a career or educational path. Yaacob et al. (2021) did a study on the parent of a student who had special needs and found that the parent was unaware of any employment training, certification of skills, or inclusive post-secondary education opportunities for children with special needs. This current lack of knowledge pushes parents and community members before they decide and limits the post-school outcomes. Tran and Nguyen (2020) have found barriers relative to culture and systemic barriers that could limit parents discovering or seeking vital information on non-academic pathways for their child. We discovered that networks and collaborations can effectively bridge the knowledge gaps among parents. Ling (2024) stated that structured interactions with fairs—academic and career, vocational institutions, and education participants—aided families by supporting their navigation to feel confident when overcoming their perceived decision-making difficulties. Once parents were engaged in structured interactions and experiences with stakeholders, then parent understanding and advocacy improved.

Effective transition requires planning with students, families, schools, and agencies at an early stage. Kirby et al. (2019) indicated that the majority of SEN students receive insufficient transition services. Rehman et al. (2022) pointed out that social pressure will push parents to opt for traditional academics over alternatives like vocational training or supported employment. Hirano et al. (2018) stressed that high-quality parental involvement needs training and ongoing communication with teachers. While the literature indicates the significance of parental involvement in transition planning, there is limited research assessing programs enhancing parental awareness through networking. Most literature concentrates on students or teachers, often overlooking interventions that focus on parents. There is very little and limited research on this topic in Malaysia.

The research has drawn upon Epstein's Parental Involvement Framework, describing six major types of involvement as crucial for the building of effective partnerships between families and schools (Epstein, 2002). The Malaysian education system has increasingly emphasized engaging parents through national initiatives such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which advocates for stronger collaboration between schools and parents to improve student achievement (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Parental understanding and involvement also exert a profound influence on future career trajectories for children, and so this approach is especially relevant within the context of special education. The networking program developed within this study is in alignment with all six categories of engagement. Take-home resources and guidance enable parents to reinforce occupational skills and attitudes in the home setting, thus addressing the component of learning at home. Active involvement of parents in individualized education plan (IEP) meetings and career pathway planning helps them become advocates for their children's future, hence promoting decision-making. Last but not least, the project promotes

community involvement by connecting parents with appropriate external stakeholders such as inclusive businesses, government agencies, and vocational schools. Current research in the Malaysian context confirms the need for organized parental involvement in the development of their children. Hamid and Mansor (2023), in their study on the 4M model of parent involvement, show how crucial a comprehensive approach using mentoring, monitoring, motivation, and role modelling is, and all these are closely aligned with Epstein's model. This paradigmatic theory informed the design of the network program, which makes sure that parental awareness is achieved through strong, culturally appropriate, and proactive methods that aim to help special education students throughout their careers.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study uses a mostly numbers-based approach, with some additional comments, to evaluate how well a networking and collaboration program helps parents understand and feel more confident about the education and career paths for SEN students. The quantitative approach is used here because it allows for the objective determination of changes in parents' perceptions of education and career opportunities for SEN students (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017). The main instrument used in this study was the questionnaire form, which was distributed to SEN students' parents after participating in the networking program. There are closed items in the questionnaire form using the Likert scale, aimed at ascertaining awareness, understanding, and confidence levels among the parent's concerning education and career guidance for their children. Past studies have recognized the quantitative survey technique as an appropriate instrument in quantifying the awareness level of special education and career transition among parents (Yaacob et al., 2021). In addition to the quantitative components, the instrument included open-ended questions that allowed parents to share their experiences, suggestions, and reflections about the program. These qualitative responses were analyzed thematically to enrich and contextualize the quantitative findings. This approach is consistent with the view of Ling (2024), who supports the inclusion of qualitative feedback to complement structured data in educational intervention research. However, because the qualitative data was not systematically collected through interviews or focus groups, the study remains fundamentally quantitative in design, with qualitative elements serving a supportive role.

Instrument

The study utilized a structured questionnaire instrument that was divided into various major sections to collect data relevant to the purposes of the study. Section A discusses the respondents' demographic information, that is, the parents' background of SEN students in the Kuala Langat District. Meanwhile, Section B attempts to gauge the program's effectiveness in terms of the degree to which it makes parents aware of the educational and vocational trajectories of children who have been involved with SEN students. This part also assesses how well school representatives' information improves parents' understanding.

The questionnaire herein is a modified version of a previously conducted study by Norsalim et al. (2021). Part C then investigates how the program affects parents' confidence in leading their children to a better and safer future. This section mainly seeks to determine the level of confidence

demonstrated by parents in their ability to assist their SEN students after attending the program and also to explore how interventions provided can strengthen the position of parents as key advocates in the education and career progression of their children. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to provide open-ended comments, which offered insights into their personal experiences, observations of program strengths or weaknesses, and recommendations for future improvement.

Analysis

Analysis of data in this research was carried out quantitatively using descriptive statistical measures, which are frequency and percentage. Data that were analyzed were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire with the Likert scale administered to parents of SEN students after participating in a networking and cooperation program. The present research evaluates the program's efficacy in enhancing parents' knowledge regarding the educational and career trajectories of SEN students and its effect on parents' self-efficacy in being able to guide their children. The primary consideration is placed on the questionnaire items addressing parents' general knowledge, effect, significance, and experience in relation to both the content and usage of the program. Feedback is divided into several categories, such as "Very Satisfactory," "Satisfactory," "Moderate," "Not Satisfactory," and "Very Not Satisfactory," among others, to determine the degree of approval based on the effectiveness of the program in question. This assessment enables researchers to establish the value contained within the content of the programs, recognize areas where comprehension may be limited, and propose relevant adjustments that fit the feedback from the involved parents. In addition, open-ended responses were analyzed using basic thematic coding to identify recurring sentiments, such as appreciation for practical exposure, needs for follow-up support, or critiques of the program structure. Although not central to the methodology, this qualitative component enriched the study by adding depth and context to the quantitative data.

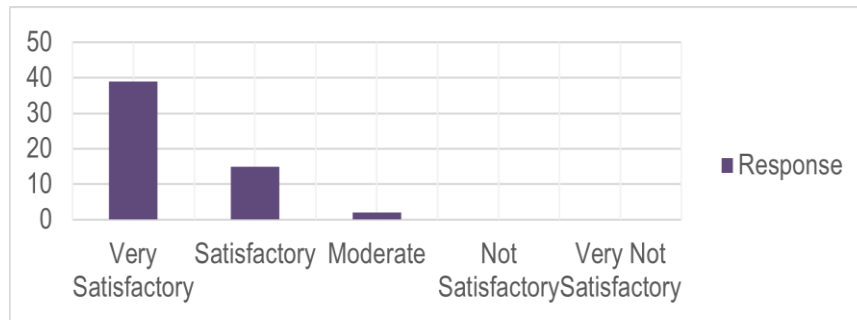
RESULTS AND FINDING

This chapter presents the quantitative results of the study based on the responses of 56 parents of SEN students who participated in a networking and collaboration program. The results are reported according to the study's three main objectives.

Findings

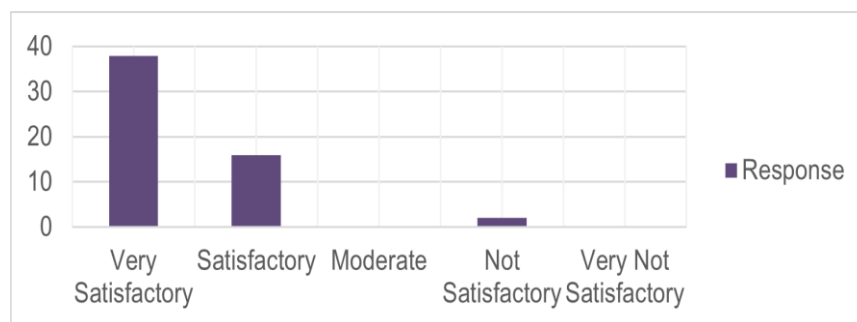
The first objective focuses on how well the program communicated relevant educational and career information to the parents. The item used to assess this aspect asked respondents to rate how effective the program was in providing them with clear and useful information about career opportunities for SEN students. Figure 4.1 illustrates the parents' responses. 69.6% (n=39) marked the provision of information as "Very Satisfactory", while 26.8% (n=15) responded "Satisfactory." 3.6% (n=2) of the parents selected "Moderate", and none of them marked "Not Satisfactory" or "Very Not Satisfactory." The results indicate that the vast majority of parents were very satisfied with the information from the program being relevant and clear. Parents also reported greater awareness of a range of pathways, including vocational training, inclusive education streams, and opportunities for partnership with industry.

Figure 4.1: Parental Rating on the Effectiveness of Information Delivery



This objective looks at the extent to which the program helped in building confidence among the parents in playing an active role in their children's future planning. Parents were requested to assess the degree to which they agreed with the assertion that the program had a beneficial effect on enabling them to shape the development of their children. As can be seen from Figure 4.2, a high 67.9% (n=38) of the respondents marked this factor as "Very Satisfactory," 28.6% (n=16) selected "Satisfactory," and just 3.6% (n=2) selected "Not Satisfactory." The responses indicate a significant effect of the program in building parental confidence, specifically by exposing them to actual success stories and contact with various educational and vocational stakeholders.

Figure 4.2: Parental Confidence in Guiding SEN STUDENTS

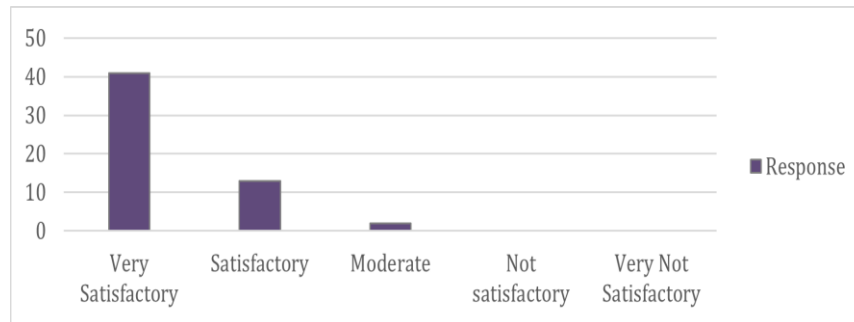


The final objective focuses on the overall understanding of educational and career paths of SEN students by the parents. The participants were asked to rate how well the program helped increase their knowledge about the future educational pathways of their children. Figure 4.3 presents the results. 73.2% (n=41) of the respondents rated the effectiveness of the program in increasing their level of comprehension as "Very Satisfactory", while 23.2% (n=13) marked "Satisfactory" and 3.6% (n=2) marked "Moderate." The lower scales received no responses.

This shows that the program improved parents' understanding and clarified their misconceptions about post-school options, especially for SEN students. Parents attested through

feedback that they were not aware of major certifications such as the Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM) prior to this project. Additionally, a fair percentage of them were not exposed to or enlightened on non-formal education avenues that could be beneficial to their children.

Figure 4.3: Parental Awareness in Guiding SEN student



Qualitative Findings

In addition to the quantitative data, this study incorporated qualitative insights through open-ended responses collected from parents of SEN students. A total of four themes emerged from a basic thematic analysis, which offer a deeper understanding of parental perceptions regarding the networking and collaboration program. The thematic summary is presented in Table 4.1, followed by a narrative elaboration for each theme with representative quotes to support the interpretation.

Table 4.1: Thematic summary

Theme	Description	Quote
Increased Awareness and Exposure	Parents gained new insights and information about education and career pathways for SEN students.	"Memberi pendedahan hala tuju kerjaya anak-anak." (R10) "Banyak maklumat diperolehi." (R39)
Suggestions for Program Improvement	Suggestions include better time management, mandatory attendance, and student engagement activities.	"Perlu disediakan aktiviti supaya murid tidak bosan." (R12) "Jika boleh wajibkan semua ibubapa dan murid hadir." (R11)
Positive Impact and Confidence Boost	The program increased parents' confidence in guiding their children toward a better future.	"Ibu bapa tidak risau untuk mencari-cari apa bila tamat persekolahan nanti." (R13) "Teruskan memberi peluang pada anak-anak OKU." (R50)
Parental Aspirations for SEN STUDENTS	Parents hope for more opportunities in vocational training and independent living for their children.	"Anak-anak dapat sambung belajar & boleh berdikari." (R9) "Memberi peluang pada mana-mana bidang yang mereka minat." (R43)

From the data presented in Table 4.1, it is quite evident that many of the respondents cited the significant role the program plays in not only providing beneficial information but also in broadening their understanding of the numerous various educational and career pathways that are available specifically to SEN students. One parent was even quoted as stating, "Memberi pendedahan hala tuju kerjaya anak-anak" (R10), which speaks to how the program had served

as such a vital point of connection between the school experience and the significant transitions that occur post-school.

This prevalent theme lends strong support to the overall effectiveness of the program in delivering information that is practical and relevant to the participants involved. In addition to the previously mentioned aspects, the respondents offered valuable and constructive feedback that could enhance and strengthen the program as a whole. The feedback was especially appropriate when it touched on time management as well as highlighting the need to incorporate fun activities that are student-centred. For instance, one parent aptly noted, "*Perlu disediakan aktiviti supaya murid tidak bosan*" (R12), or the necessity to have activities so that students will not feel bored. This critical feedback works to underscore the imperative need to design future programs in such a way that they are inclusive and participatory in nature for both the parents and their children so that a more interactive and dynamic learning process can be fostered for all stakeholders involved.

Most parents said the program eased their fears and boosted their confidence in their kids' futures. As one parent put it so succinctly, "*Ibu bapa tidak risau untuk mencari-cari apa bila tamat persekolahan nanti*" (R13). This specific comment helps to show well that the program did not only bring certainty; it also helped empower parents to provide support to their children with an obvious direction and purpose. Finally, parents expressed their hopes and expectations about their children's independence and their future educational opportunities in life. One participant expressed this expectation succinctly by proclaiming, "*Anak-anak dapat sambung belajar & boleh berdikari*" (R9), which indicates that the program made a significant difference in their lives as it motivated them to set not just realistic but meaningful and substantial goals for their children's future growth and success.

DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

The findings of this study strongly reinforce the first research objective, which aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of delivering career-related information to parents of SEN students. The program was instrumental in raising parental awareness, with over 96% of respondents rating the sessions as either *Very Satisfactory* or *Satisfactory*. Many parents acknowledged that prior to attending the program, they had little to no knowledge of key pathways such as the Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM) or other industry-aligned certification routes. This observation is supported by qualitative feedback, which suggested that the sessions provided not only new insights but also presented information in a more structured and accessible manner than traditional school-based briefings. These results are consistent with the work of Durisic and Bunijevac (2017) and Yaacob et al. (2021), both of whom identified the lack of clear and structured information as a significant barrier to effective transition planning for students with special needs.

In alignment with the second objective—to assess the extent to which the program improved parental confidence—the data indicates a marked increase in self-efficacy among participants. Parents reported not only greater clarity about available options, but also a stronger sense of readiness to support their children in navigating post-secondary choices. This shift from uncertainty to confidence is clearly illustrated in qualitative reflections such as "*Ibu bapa tidak*

risau untuk mencari-cari apa bila tamat persekolahan nanti." Exposure to career exhibitions, real-life success stories, and meaningful engagement with education and industry stakeholders proved to be key drivers of this transformation. Ling (2024) highlights similar outcomes, arguing that real-world interactions and structured support play a vital role in strengthening parental advocacy. These findings suggest that future programs should explicitly include confidence-building components, in addition to the dissemination of information.

Addressing the third objective, which focused on comparing parental awareness before and after program participation, the results reveal a substantial positive shift. Many parents began with limited understanding of inclusive education opportunities, vocational pathways, and work-based learning programs. However, post-program feedback indicated a surge in optimism, with many expressing newfound enthusiasm and hope for their children's future prospects. This underscores the program's effectiveness not only in transferring knowledge, but also in transforming parental outlooks. The shift highlights the critical role of structured interventions in reshaping beliefs and expectations about what SEN students can achieve beyond school.

Finally, the outcomes of this study align with the findings of Ellafi and Al (2024), who emphasized the importance of multi-agency collaboration in the transition process. Their research points to the necessity of accessible, locally relevant information and coordinated support systems for families of students with special needs. The current study reaffirms that a holistic model—one that integrates information-sharing, emotional empowerment, and meaningful interaction—is essential in preparing both parents and students for life after secondary school. In doing so, it underscores the value of not merely informing parents but also equipping them with the confidence and networks needed to actively guide their children through future educational and career pathways.

Conclusions

This study examined the effectiveness of a networking and collaboration program in enhancing parental awareness, confidence, and understanding of post-secondary educational and career opportunities for SEN students. Through a mixed-methods approach, the findings demonstrated that the program significantly improved parents' comprehension of various transition pathways—including vocational certifications, industry training, and inclusive education—and helped build their confidence to guide their children after secondary school. The results also highlighted the value of structured information sessions and meaningful stakeholder engagement in addressing both informational and emotional gaps commonly faced by parents.

Overall, the study met all three of its research objectives and reaffirmed the importance of targeted parental engagement initiatives in transition planning. By equipping parents with relevant knowledge and emotional support, programs like this can play a transformative role in shaping more inclusive and purpose-driven futures for SEN students.

Recommendations

The results of this study lead to several recommendations to improve the effectiveness of parental participation in education and career plans for SEN students. First, schools should consider delivering structured career awareness programs each year, rather than delivering one-off events or activities. These programs should not only be informative but also encourage participation from parents and students. Collaborative spaces for parents and children to learn together and plan

can help initiate the process of building shared understanding and shared purpose in direction. To support this, schools should encourage collaboration with vocational partners such as Giatmara, ILP, and community colleges to support the development of accessible options beyond secondary transition.

In a broader context, from a policy perspective and action, the Ministry of Education and stakeholders could think about developing a national policy framework for parent engagement in transition planning. Schools should have guidelines or best practices in place to enable families to engage purposefully in planning for transition. Furthermore, schools should have financially and administratively accessible support to transition support consistently across schools, especially in rural and low-resourced schools. Future studies should include longitudinal ones to investigate the long-term effects of these programs on both student outcomes and parental engagement.

Future research should also develop a more thorough demographic profile, which considers aspects such as parents' level of education, income level, and employment history, to identify the trends and explore contextual variables that may have implications regarding program effects. Future research should also promote qualitative exploration, as interviews or focus group discussions may provide more understanding of the experiences parents are having as well as the expectations the parents have when transitioning with their children.

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