

Barriers to Effective Career Transition Planning for Students with Special Educational Needs in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study of PPKI Teachers' Experiences

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ABSTRACT - Globally, students with special educational needs (SEN) continue to face substantial barriers in securing meaningful employment, and these challenges persist in Malaysia despite the existence of structured transition programs. The Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI) serves as a key national initiative to equip SEN students with life and vocational skills, workplace readiness and community integration. However, limited empirical research has qualitatively examined the day-to-day realities faced by teachers in implementing such programs. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of four PPKI teachers through semi-structured interviews, analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Five interrelated challenges were identified: limited parental involvement, peer influence, employer perceptions, insufficient teacher training and inadequate facilities. These findings highlight systemic and school-level barriers that directly affect the quality and sustainability of transition services. Practical implications include strengthening school-family partnerships, fostering positive peer environments, enhancing employer readiness through awareness initiatives, providing targeted professional development for teachers and improving vocational infrastructure. Addressing these issues can advance Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by ensuring inclusive and equitable vocational opportunities and Sustainable Development Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) through stronger multi-stakeholder collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from school to the workforce represents a critical milestone in the lives of students with special educational needs (SEN). Effective career transition programs have been shown to enhance employability, foster self-determination, and promote social inclusion (Husni & Low, 2024). These programs typically encompass individualised planning, vocational training, life skills development and authentic work-based learning experiences, all of which are vital for preparing students to meet the demands of adult life and competitive employment (Husni & Low, 2023; Zainal & Hashim, 2019).

In Malaysia, the Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI) serves as the primary vehicle for delivering structured transition education at the secondary school level. Its objectives align with national education priorities and global frameworks such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). However, despite comprehensive policy guidelines, implementation remains inconsistent. Schools frequently encounter constraints in resources, time allocation, administrative demands and collaboration with external stakeholders (Mokhtar et al., 2024). These limitations contribute to a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities (Tordin & Tahar, 2021).

Teachers play a central role in determining the success of transition initiatives. Their skills, attitudes and ability to engage families, employers, and community partners directly influence program outcomes (Mohd Yusoff & Khairuddin, 2024). Despite this, there is a scarcity of qualitative research capturing teachers' lived experiences in navigating these responsibilities, particularly in the Malaysian context. Without understanding these experiences, reform efforts risk being disconnected from practical realities, leading to ineffective interventions.

Existing literature has predominantly focused on structural and procedural aspects such as curriculum design, resource provision, and teacher readiness (Abdullah & Ibrahim, 2021). While these studies have provided valuable insights, they often overlook the interplay between systemic, institutional, and interpersonal factors, including parental engagement, peer dynamics, and industry collaboration. This study addresses these gaps by using a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the perspectives of PPKI teachers. It offers context-specific insights that can guide policy reform, improve program relevance, and support inclusive, sustainable career transition services for SEN students.

BACKGROUND STUDIES

In Malaysia, the Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI) plays a central role in delivering transition education at the secondary school level. National guidelines focus on life skills, vocational skills, workplace readiness, and community integration. However, as seen in other education systems, strong policies do not always lead to consistent implementation in schools. Challenges include limited time for practical training, heavy administrative workloads and inconsistent collaboration between schools and external partners (Mokhtar et al., 2024). This suggests that success depends not only on the curriculum but also on local capacity, school routines, and partnerships with other organisations.

These goals are in line with global priorities such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 promotes equal access to quality education and lifelong learning, while SDG 17 calls for partnerships between different sectors to achieve sustainable outcomes. Effective transition programs require strong collaboration between education authorities, schools, families, employers, community groups and social services (Khairul et al., 2023; Shaffeei et al., 2020). This can be supported by clear role definitions, responsible data sharing, and joint accountability. In practice, this means formal agreements with industry, family planning meetings and referral systems with community agencies.

Family involvement is a key factor in successful transition. Parents help set goals, maintain routines, and often create opportunities for work experience. When families are included in education planning and know how to support skill development at home, students make stronger progress (Mariza & Mohd Norazmi, 2025). However, schools often face barriers such as time limits, gaps in parents' knowledge of the labour market and different expectations about outcomes. Providing targeted family education, using culturally responsive communication and offering accessible information on available support can help close these gaps (Mariza & Mohd Norazmi, 2025).

Peers and school climate also play an important role. Positive peer relationships can boost confidence, communication, and problem-solving skills that are useful in the workplace. Strategies such as peer-assisted learning and group projects have been linked to better social skills and stronger engagement in work tasks. In contrast, social isolation can limit students' chances to practise workplace behaviours. Inclusive activities, project-based learning, and mixed-ability teams can create regular opportunities for students to practise these skills in a supportive environment (Pit et al., 2023).

Employers are another critical part of the process. Their willingness to offer work experience or jobs depends on perceptions about productivity, supervision needs and the feasibility of workplace adjustments. To address concerns, strategies such as short training sessions for employers, on-the-job coaching, clear task matching and minor workplace modifications can be effective (Cannon-Bowers et al., 2023; Yusop et al., 2024). Community-based learning, internships, and supported employment help bridge the gap between school and the workplace (Salazar Gomez et al., 2023).

Teacher preparation and ongoing training are essential for high-quality transition programs. Teachers need skills beyond regular teaching, such as vocational assessment, person-centred planning, and work placement coordination. When these skills are not covered in pre-service training, in-service professional development becomes crucial. Teachers have reported needing practical resources, examples of good practice and networks to share solutions. Without these supports, implementation may be inconsistent and rely too heavily on individual initiative (Yusoff & Khairuddin, 2024).

School facilities and organisational systems also shape what can be delivered. Well-equipped workshops, industry-standard tools, transport to work sites, and assistive technologies make training more realistic. Strong management systems that track goals, document work experience, and monitor outcomes after school help ensure continuous improvement. Formal partnerships with employers and the appointment of workplace mentors can provide ongoing support as students move into jobs (Shaffeei et al., 2020; Yusop et al., 2024; Zainal & Hashim, 2019).

In summary, effective school-to-work transition programs require an interconnected approach involving families, peers, employers, teachers, and school resources. While clear frameworks exist, challenges such as policy gaps, limited resources, and organisational barriers remain. Understanding the daily realities of schools through qualitative research can provide valuable insights to improve policy, strengthen collaboration, and create more effective transition pathways for SEN students in Malaysia.

Problem Statement

Although policy frameworks and structured modules exist to guide the delivery of career transition programs, their effective implementation remains inconsistent across Malaysian secondary schools. Studies have shown that while structured programs such as the PPKI aim to provide holistic transition services, there is often a gap between policy intent and actual practice due to systemic and institutional constraints (Zulkifli et al., 2024). Empirical evidence indicates that insufficient parental engagement can lead to reduced student motivation (Ramesh Sharma, 2024), while negative peer influence can undermine participation in vocational activities (Wang et al., 2025). Similarly, employers' reluctance to accommodate SEN students, which is often driven by misconceptions about productivity and supervision requirements, further limits access to authentic work experiences (Dewi & Nurfaidah, 2024).

Teacher-related factors also play a critical role. A lack of specialised training in career planning, vocational assessment, and interagency collaboration has been reported to weaken program delivery (Deardorff et al., 2021; Mohd Yusoff & Khairuddin, 2024; Perryman & Kucharczyk, 2020). Compounding this, inadequate facilities and limited access to industry-standard tools reduce the realism and quality of vocational training, making it less aligned with workplace demands (Mokhtar et al., 2024). While these challenges have been documented in various studies, there remains a paucity of qualitative research capturing the nuanced, lived experiences of PPKI teachers who navigate these obstacles daily.

Without such insights, reform initiatives risk adopting a top-down orientation that lacks alignment with practical realities. This misalignment can diminish the effectiveness of policy measures and result in limited impact on student outcomes. The present study addresses this critical gap by systematically examining the perspectives of PPKI teachers on the implementation of career transition programs. Through this analysis, the study generates evidence-based recommendations that respond to both systemic and school-level challenges. These recommendations are designed to enhance the relevance, accessibility, and sustainability of career transition services for students with special educational needs, thereby supporting more equitable and effective educational pathways.

Addressing these identified gaps is central to the purpose of this study. By focusing on the lived experiences of PPKI teachers, the research aims to explore the practical challenges they encounter in implementing career transition programs for SEN students. This approach not only addresses the shortage of qualitative evidence in the Malaysian context but also informs the development of targeted, context-specific strategies to improve program relevance, accessibility and sustainability.

Research Aim and Objective

The overarching aim of this study is to explore the practical challenges faced by PPKI teachers in implementing career transition programs for students with SEN and to propose evidence-based strategies for improvement. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the key barriers affecting the implementation of career transition programs in PPKI from the perspective of teachers.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of teachers implementing career transition programs for students with SEN within the Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI) context. Four teachers were selected through purposive sampling based on their teaching experience and active involvement in transition program delivery. Although the sample size was relatively small, it was sufficient to achieve data saturation, as recurring patterns emerged across participants' narratives, reflecting the depth and richness of qualitative inquiry (Ting et al., 2023; Young & Casey, 2018). The inclusion criteria required participants to be full-time PPKI teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience and direct responsibility for implementing vocational and transition-related activities. All four teachers were based in secondary schools located across both urban and semi-urban districts in Kedah, thereby providing diverse perspectives on contextual challenges.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, guided by open-ended questions to encourage detailed reflection. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which included familiarisation, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting. To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted with participants to confirm the accuracy of transcripts and interpretations, while peer debriefing with experts in special education further validated the findings. An audit trail was maintained to document methodological decisions, ensuring transparency and trustworthiness. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants, with confidentiality and voluntary participation strictly upheld. The profile of the study participants can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants Profile

Participant	Gender	Working Experience
GPK1	Female	29 years
GPK2	Female	20 years
GPK3	Female	14 years
GPK4	Female	23 years

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interview data identified five main themes related to the challenges in implementing career transition programs in Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI): parental involvement, peer influence, employer attitudes, insufficient teacher training and inadequate facilities.

Table 2. Themes and Excerpts on Challenges in Implementing Career Transition Programs

Theme	Excerpts from Selected Statement
Parental Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...family support for work-based training has not yet been fully realised...” (GPK3) “...the establishment of the Family Support Group (KSAK) has yet to become a consistent practice...” (GPK2)
Peer Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...peer influence often affects the motivation of SEN students, especially when they observe their peers not participating or showing disinterest in work training...” (GPK1)
Employer Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...collaboration with local industries remains limited, and employers are reluctant to accept SEN students due to a lack of understanding of their potential...” (GPK2)
Insufficient Teacher Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...many teachers have not received specific training on implementing career transition programs, particularly in career planning and assessing work readiness...” (GPK4)
Inadequate Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...school infrastructure and resources such as job aids and external training venues are still insufficient...” (GPK1) “...access to suitable training locations also poses a challenge...” (GPK2)

Parental Engagement

Parental engagement has been recognized as a significant obstacle in the execution of career transition programs designed for students with special educational needs (SEN). While a subset of parents exhibited proactive support, a considerable number appeared disengaged or uninformed regarding the aims and long-term advantages of such initiatives. GPK3 articulated that “*family support for work-based training has not yet been fully realised*” thereby underscoring the deficiency in consistent parental involvement in equipping students for future employment.

Teachers observed that limited familial engagement frequently resulted in diminished student motivation, inadequate attendance in vocational pursuits and challenges in adapting to work-based educational settings. These impediments were particularly pronounced among students whose parents were unaware of their offspring's potential or did not prioritize the readiness for employment. GPK2 further noted that “*the establishment of the Family Support Group (KSAK) has yet to become a consistent practice*,” indicating the sporadic application of support frameworks intended to enhance familial participation.

This observation aligns with Abdullah & Ibrahim (2021), who reported that limited parental participation undermines students vocational outcomes by weakening confidence and reducing sustained engagement. Although initiatives such as KSAK exist, their uneven implementation indicates a gap between strategic intent and classroom practice. To address this concern, communication between schools and families should be strengthened through scheduled parent briefings, structured home school collaboration and awareness efforts on the value of career transition planning. Without sustained parental involvement, attempts to prepare students with special educational needs for employment are likely to remain fragmented and less effective.

Peer Influence

Peer influence emerged as a significant factor affecting the implementation of career transition programs for students with SEN. Teachers reported that these students are highly responsive to the attitudes and behaviours of their classmates. According to GPK1, “*peer influence often affects the motivation of SEN students, especially when they observe their peers not participating or showing disinterest in work training*.” Such situations often lead to a decline in motivation and participation among other students.

This pattern is consistent with Hadi et al. (2023), who argue that peer relationships are central to engagement and the formation of career aspirations. By contrast, motivated and encouraging peers can bolster confidence and increase participation, echoing evidence from Owusu et al. (2021) that peer

support and shared motivation shape vocational interests and choices. In response, schools should intentionally build a positive peer culture that prioritises cooperation, support, and shared responsibility. Practical measures include peer mentoring, group based vocational tasks and formal recognition of constructive peer modelling. As Kvasková et al. (2023) demonstrate, such initiatives are associated with improved academic and vocational outcomes, underscoring peer dynamics as a critical lever for effective transition programming.

Employer Attitudes

Employer attitudes remain a key obstacle in the implementation of career transition programs for students with SEN. Teachers reported limited collaboration with local industries, as many employers were reluctant to accept SEN students due to misconceptions about their abilities. GPK2 stated, *“collaboration with local industries remains limited, and employers are reluctant to accept SEN students due to a lack of understanding of their potential.”*

Employer reluctance frequently reflects limited awareness of how reasonable accommodations can enable students with special educational needs to perform effectively at work. As a consequence, even students who demonstrate readiness and motivation are denied opportunities for authentic work exposure. This pattern aligns with Norhayati et al. (2021), who attribute employer hesitation to negative perceptions and insufficient understanding of SEN capabilities. Teachers further noted that weak school industry partnerships constrain feedback and hinder alignment between vocational training and labour market expectations. Consistent with Zainun et al. (2020), this disconnect undermines employability and reduces the durability of job placements. To address these barriers, deliberate employer engagement is required, including awareness briefings, short trial placements, joint curriculum alignment sessions and sustained collaboration to build employer readiness and expand inclusive opportunities for students with SEN.

Insufficient Teacher Training

A lack of specific and structured training was identified as a major barrier to the effective implementation of career transition programs. Teachers shared that while the Program Transisi Kerjaya module exists, it often functions as the sole reference without additional training or contextual guidance. GPK4 remarked that *“many teachers have not received specific training on implementing career transition programs, particularly in career planning and assessing work readiness.”*

The dependence on a singular resource has constrained teachers' capacity to modify instructional content in accordance with the varied needs of their students. Participants indicated challenges in formulating individualized work-based learning strategies, executing readiness evaluations and interacting with employers. This observation corroborates the findings of Mohd Yusoff & Khairuddin (2024), in the absence of ongoing professional development, teachers are often left to navigate the complexities of transition planning through trial and error, which can lead to inconsistent program delivery and reduced student outcomes

As Md Isa & Toran (2024) further articulate, inadequate training undermines the effective translation of policy into practice. For meaningful implementation to occur, teachers necessitate not merely content knowledge but also practical competencies and ongoing support. The enhancement of training delivery through workshops, mentoring and experiential modules is imperative to empower teachers with the requisite skills to administer high-quality, student-centric transition programs (Md Isa & Toran, 2024).

Inadequate Facilities

Lack of proper facilities emerged as a practical barrier in the implementation of career transition programs at PPKI. Teachers highlighted that many schools lacked dedicated space for vocational training. GPK1 reported that *“school infrastructure and resources such as job aids and external training venues are still insufficient.”* while GPK2 added that *“access to suitable training locations also poses a challenge.”*

The constraints imposed by limited spatial dimensions and insufficient safety measures significantly impeded hands-on activities, which are imperative for the acquisition of practical skills. As

articulated by Tordin and Mokhtar (2021), restricted educational environments can adversely affect student mobility and safety, thereby diminishing the efficacy of experiential learning sessions.

Furthermore, educational institutions frequently lacked suitable vocational resources and materials, compelling teachers to depend predominantly on theoretical instruction. This reliance curtailed students' confidence and preparedness to participate in authentic occupational tasks (Rusli, 2024). Ahmad and Rosnan (2024) similarly emphasized that limited access to industry-standard equipment weakens the alignment between school-based vocational training and real-world job expectations (Ahmad & Rosnan, 2024). Mitigating these challenges necessitates considerable investment in both infrastructural enhancements and educational resources. As emphasized by Alshoura (2023), furnishing schools with adequate facilities is crucial for improving the quality and pertinence of vocational training for students with SEN.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges faced by teachers in implementing career transition programs for students with SEN within the Malaysian Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI). Five major barriers were identified: limited parental involvement, peer influence, employer attitudes, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate facilities. These findings reveal the complex interplay of individual, institutional and systemic factors that shape the effectiveness of transition initiatives. The key contribution of this study lies in providing qualitative evidence from the lived experiences of teachers, an area that remains underexplored in the Malaysian context. By doing so, the article extends international discourse by illustrating how sociocultural dynamics, employer readiness and family engagement affect transition outcomes in developing countries, contrasting with much of the existing literature which is heavily situated in developed contexts.

From a policy and practice perspective, several strategies are proposed to strengthen implementation. Parental engagement can be enhanced through the institutionalisation of Family Support Groups (KSAK) and regular awareness workshops. Positive peer cultures should be fostered through peer mentoring and collaborative vocational projects. Employers require structured engagement through awareness campaigns, short term placements and curriculum alignment initiatives supported by the Ministry of Education. Teacher capacity should be strengthened via sustained professional development that incorporates practical workshops, mentoring and industry linked training. Finally, investment in purpose built vocational facilities and strategic partnerships with technical institutions can ensure authentic work-based learning opportunities. Collectively, these measures not only improve the sustainability and inclusiveness of transition services in Malaysia but also contribute towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

In addition, the findings of this study underscore the value of teacher voices in informing improvements to policy implementation and professional training. As frontline implementers of transition programs, teachers possess practical insights into resource gaps, administrative constraints and school community needs that are often overlooked in policy development. Incorporating their perspectives into national level planning can support more responsive guidelines, better aligned training modules and more effective support systems for PPKI implementation.

This study is subject to several limitations. The small sample size of four teachers limits the range of perspectives represented, although the qualitative data were sufficiently rich and saturated. In addition, the study was conducted exclusively in Kedah, a single geographic region that may differ from other states in terms of available resources, school–industry collaboration and programme structures. As such, the findings should be interpreted within the contextual boundaries of this study and are not intended to be generalised to all PPKI settings in Malaysia.

Looking ahead, future studies should consider larger and more diverse samples, investigate regional variations, and use longitudinal designs to track long term employment outcomes, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding and more effective transition pathways for students with SEN.

To further enhance the clarity of the study's implications, a conceptual flowchart is provided to visually summarise the relationship between the barriers identified in this research and the system-level recommendations proposed to strengthen the implementation of career transition programs in PPKI.

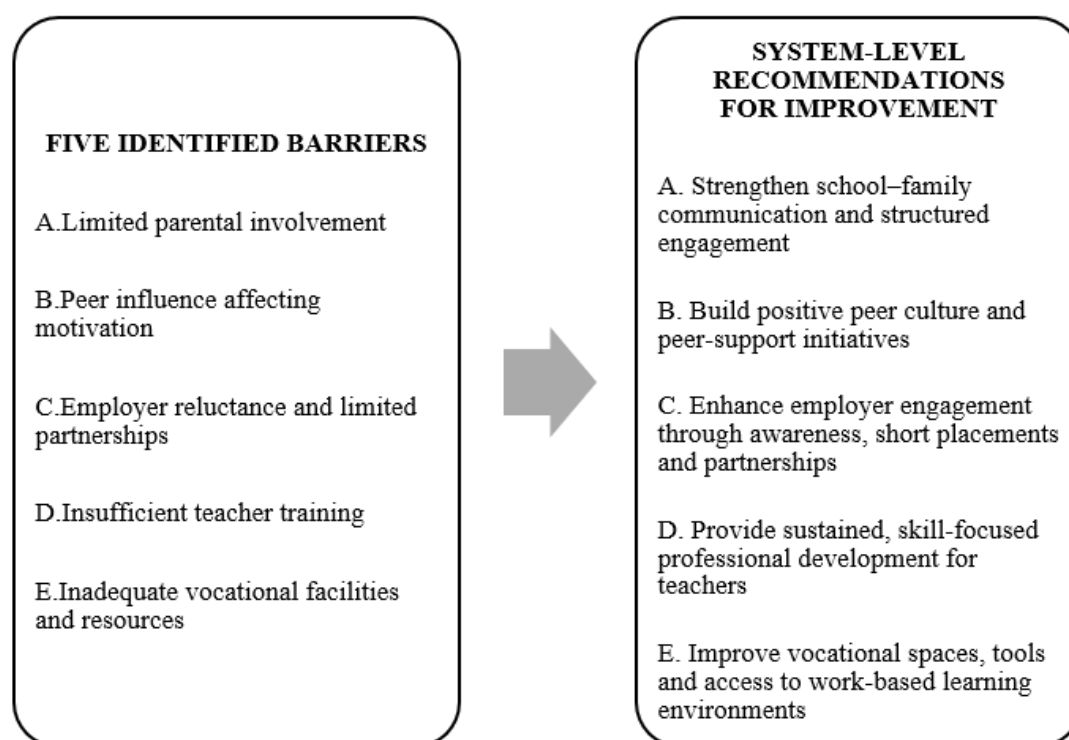


Figure 1. Conceptual flowchart illustrating the relationship between the five identified barriers and the corresponding system-level recommendations for improving the implementation of career transition programs for SEN.

This conceptual representation reinforces the need for a coordinated, multi-level response that addresses both school-based and system-wide factors. By aligning these recommendations with the barriers identified, the figure highlights practical pathways for strengthening transition services and supporting more equitable employment outcomes for students with SEN.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT and Scite to enhance the clarity and organization of the writing. After using the ChatGPT and Scispace, the author(s) thoroughly reviewed, revised and edited all generated content as necessary. The author(s) take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity and originality of the final manuscript.

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