"NOT AS EASY AS DO RE MI": THE EXPERIENCE OF THREE VISUALLY IMPAIRED VOCATIONAL TRAINEES IN AUDIO PRODUCTION COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Technical and vocational training receive increasingly positive attention by the day. The same focus is also growing in Malaysia. This paper aims to present findings from our conversation with three visually impaired vocational trainees at one of the local vocational training centers regarding their experience in undertaking an audio production program. We pick these three informants purposively for this research purpose via direct relationship we have with one of the trainees. The informants share their excitement and they are eager to learn about audio production processes, however, they face few challenges in completing the course. Those challenges are lack of necessary equipment and inaccessibility of the software used for learning purposes. The informants report they receive good support from their instructor, as well from the employer at the workplace which they go for their practical training for three weeks. Although they are still figuring out their career path after course completion, they feel visually impaired individuals have the potential to work in audio production related industry. Our informants put forth a few suggestions in order to increase the quality of the training course. At the end of this paper, we highlight measures suggested by our informants to different parties in order to increase the participation of visually impaired individuals in the audio production related industry. We strongly advocate for more empirical work, extracting both quantitative and qualitative data on disabled Malaysians' participation in and the effectiveness of local technical and vocational education. Besides that, equal emphasis is on multi-sectoral collaboration, mainly between government agencies, training centers, Disabled People's Organizations, and academia.

Keywords: Visually impaired trainees, vocational training, audio production, learning support, career opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there is growing attention and interests on vocational and technical education in the local sphere. Malaysian government recognizes of its importance as part of their agenda through various policies and action plans. After the 14th General Election, the new government establishes a special committee to collect and collate data, and come up with a strategy to enhance local technical and vocational education. In Malaysia, Department of Skill Development, Ministry of Human Resources is responsible to develop, approve, monitor and accredit the Malaysian Skill Certificate. There are four levels, starting from level 2 up to level 5. Level 4 is equivalent to a diploma, whereas level 5 is considered as a higher diploma. Nowadays, there are many programs and courses that offer Malaysian Skill Certificate, ranging from mechanical and electrical field to human services. As section 28 of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 states, all disabled persons are guaranteed of their rights to be enrolled in all levels of education including in vocational and technical training.

There are several non-profit organizations catering to the needs of the blind community which also provide vocational training programs. Traditionally, reflexology and body massage is the most popular vocational program among the blind community. However, new vocational training programs are being introduced even though it is progressing slowly. This paper presents the experience of three young vocational trainees with visual impairment in undertaking audio production training course at one of the local training centers. We are very much interested to learn about vocational training program offered to visually impaired individuals, especially in a new area like audio production. This study does not only promote more opportunities for the vocational program in new sectors for the blind community, but we also wish to add empirical study relating to blind people for knowledge advancement in the academy and for policy development.

Diversity in vocational education is not a new thing because, in contrast to other forms of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary), there is no single specific group of individuals either in terms of age group or even level of capacity who are the sole beneficiaries of the vocational education and different arrangement of institutions are used to provide such training (Billett, 2011, p. 4). However, diversity in vocational education does not only refer to racial and gender diversity. In fact, we must look this sector to include more marginalized groups such as indigenous people and persons living with impairment and/or chronic illness. This is very much in line with international movement and aspiration to promote education for all as well as in local environment with the recent introduction of Zero Reject Policy that prohibit any children to be denied entering educational institution which we believe should expand to technical and vocational education.

However, in order to ensure inclusion of disabled persons in technical and vocational education sector, several systemic measures must be carried out which include introducing enabling policies, challenging misconceptions about disabled persons' abilities and capabilities, providing accessible infrastructure, reviewing and adjusting entry procedure and learning process, strengthening instructors' capacity to effectively teach disabled trainees, forming collaboration across different stakeholders, establishing support system, conducting continuous monitoring and ensuring sufficient funding (International Labour Organization, 2017).

The paper begins with a literature review on vocational training for disabled people in general. Next, we provide a description of the methodological framework used in this research. Then, we discuss our findings from our informants' experiences throughout the process of undertaking an audio production course. Finally, we discuss the suggestions voiced out by our informants on ways to increase the participation of visually impaired individuals in the local audio production industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition to the abundance of recommendations and guidelines, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has developed a practical guide to foster inclusive vocational training program for disabled individuals which covers learning processes, building inclusive environment and disability etiquettes (International Labour Organization, 2013). Besides that, Article 2(4) of the UNESCO Convention on Technical and Vocational Education also stresses that each country should pay attention to the needs of the disabled people and other disadvantaged groups as well as take appropriate measures in order for those groups to benefit from technical and vocational education (UNESCO, 1989). However, little research is available concerning vocational education and training for disabled people (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012).

One of the studies is through Kin, Holgersen, Borgh, and Fjar (2011) which they conduct a study with five candidates with severe mental health problems who participate in a transitional vocational course. In that study, they find that participants perceive some of the philosophy of the program are unhelpful. Therefore, Zhao in his study with disabled people in Vietnam states that:

> "An effective vocational training program needs to consider many aspects— infrastructure renovation, curriculum design, technical training, soft skills training, student recruitment, job placement, fundraising, advocacy and more." (Zhao, 2012).

In Bangladesh, a study by Nuri and her colleagues (2012) show that out of 261 disabled persons who undertake vocational training at one center, 157 of them successfully secure a job after completing their training. Moreover, 74% of those successful graduates report that they are able to provide a better life for their families, 92% claim to have increased social acceptance, and 83% state that their condition is improving in the overall quality of life. Those who are unable to find a job, 15% of them cite issues relating to the training course, 6% mention discriminatory attitudes of potential employers and 12% have problems in regards to physical access.

For students with learning disabilities, Tomblin and Haring (1999) stress the need for a better and effective vocational training for this group to facilitate their transition from school to workplace, by focusing on the linkages of what they learn in class and how to apply it in employment world, besides other skills development such as communication, teamwork and self-advocacy through collaboration between special education teachers, vocational teachers and vocational counsellors. Furthermore, vocational training in their opinion must be contextualized within the community participation and employment sector.

Swain (1993) in his ethnographic research at a special vocational college for disabled youngsters find that segregated vocational schooling acts more as preparation to gain social acceptance among the disabled youngsters and the complex relationships between different parties in the college as well as for the students' freedom and their perception towards equality. Here, it shows us that vocational education should not be seen as merely training syllabus and practical exams, but also comprise of power relations and interaction, either within the training center or the wider educational system.

In reviewing the skill development opportunities for disabled youths in China, Kenya, Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone, Kett (2012) finds there is a number of pressing obstacles which include blurry legislation, lack of awareness about training or funding opportunities, stigmatization, inaccessible infrastructure, poverty, and lack of support for disabled employees. Her research also reveals the connection of education opportunities, including vocational training, to countries' historical context, government's policies and strategies, and roles of international bodies or non-governmental organizations. All four countries show a promising progress with few intervention programs including training programs, grants provision and other affirmative actions though further studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of all initiatives.

Let us now turn to local literature. Based on a preliminary survey on interests and confidence among 127 hearing impaired students in special vocational schools toward vocational education, it is recorded that these students are interested in vocational education but their confidence is at a moderate level (Minhat, Abdullah, Kamin, Hamid & Zulkifli, 2015). In another study by Wahid and her colleagues (2013) among 13 disabled trainees in painting course and 11 disabled trainees in batik course at Industrial Training and Rehabilitation Centre at Bangi, their research participants are satisfied with the benefits of the course, the course contents, the teaching staff, and physical facilities. Nonetheless, they admit the research is limited only to the reaction of research participants.

Getting a job is the most prominent factor for physically impaired individuals to enter the technical and vocational field as articulated in Baser and his colleagues' (2017) work. Notwithstanding they show positive attitudes toward the technical and vocational course, their research participants still believe factors such as employers and work experience are the most critical obstacles for them to participate in the employment sector. It shows the effectiveness of technical and vocational training is partially reflected by one's success in landing in decent work. Therefore, it is imperative to locate the issue of technical and vocational education for disabled persons in a wider economic and political ecosystem, without discarding heir experience and emotions in the process as well as other technical and logistical aspects.

METHODOLOGY

Generally, this study employs a qualitative research design. This qualitative study pays a great focus on the narratives from our three informants with regards to their experience, feelings, and ambitions. Narrative-based research methodology is not uncommon in disability studies. In fact, narratives gained from disabled people can be viewed as powerful empowerment and emancipation tools (Block & Weatherford, 2013; Owens, 2007; Topp, 2004). In disability studies, Smith and Sparkes (2008) assert the flexibility of analyzing narratives using different methods which are structural, performative and autoethnographic creative analytic approaches.

There are three informants who agree to take part in this study; Ibrahim, Azman, and Adam. The reason why we only get three informants is that only three individuals are still undertaking the audio production course at the time of this study is conducted. The informants inform us that there are few other peers who also enrolled in the program, but many of them dropped out, which in the end leaving only three trainees in the program. We use purposive sampling approach by contacting one of the informants whom we already had a connection with. Through him, we ask for agreement from the other two informants to participate in this study. Afterword, we then set up a date and time to conduct the focus group discussion.

We use focus group discussion as the data collection method. We choose to do focus group discussion with our informants instead of using other means of data collection because of three reasons. First, we want to get a bulk of information simultaneously from our informants. Second, it is easier to organize group discussion since all of our informants live at the training institution where they undertake the audio production course. Third, we believe that when we converse with our informants in a group setting instead of one-to-one communication, we are able to increase the sense of comfort among our informants which minimize the possible restrictive emotions such as shame, nervousness, and worry. The discussion is recorded for data transcription. We conduct the discussion in Malay language. For the purpose of this paper, we translate the excerpt from our informants' responses to English as exactly as possible without reducing the messages and meanings.

We analyze the data collected from the focus group discussion using the thematic analysis technique. We transcribe the interview recording into text form using Microsoft Office Word software. From there, we then identify the pattern of informants responses to each of the questions.

DISCUSSION

The duration of the audio production course is one year and a half, the first six months for level 2 then continues to level 3 for another year. One informant tells us that a diploma level course will be offered to start in 2018. The training is provided by a non-profit organization catering to the needs of the blind community located in Kuala Lumpur. During the course, the informants are exposed on how to manage and use related equipment, different types of software and audio production process.

We first start our conversation with our informants by asking their feelings toward the course. All three of them feel excited before and still excited throughout the course. This shows that they are very interested and passionate about audio production.

> *Azman: Felt curious to know. Because the area that we are interested in. Besides that, I want to know things that I didn't know before and knowing the [correct] things about whatever we already knew. ... How to do a recording. ... We get detail and deeper knowledge.*
>
> *Ibrahim: Felt excited because never before blind people undertake the audio course. Want to know how blind people can do it.*
>
> *Adam: Same [like them]. Excited. Another thing, when we talk about recording, recording can be in many forms. How to make it sound beautiful. Make it awesome. Want to know those things. Then, want to know what device to use.*

The deeper we go into the discussion, it becomes apparent that these youngsters have to face few major problems which can affect their learning process. The first challenge is the lack of equipment.

> *Adam: ... if possible, it's true the situation can become better. ... Right now it's OK, but it becomes a bit less good because of the equipment... That's why.*
>
> *Ibrahim: The equipment. Add the [necessary] equipment.*
>
> *Azman: ... currently, we don't have sufficient equipment. Plus for diploma course level next semester. Must add [the equipment]. Should be complete. ... a standard studio should have two rooms. One for the control room, another room for recording.*

To them, this challenge occurs due to financial constraints.

> *Adam: Maybe the budget [approval] slow.*
>
> *Azman: They said the equipment will be provided at the early semester, but next week and the following weeks, eventually until end of semester still nothing.*
>
> *Researcher: So, is there any action taken by your instructor? Maybe his way to get it?*
>
> *Azman: Quotation has been sent many times. But, no result.*
>
> *Adam: Quotation has been sent several times. Sometimes they ask to lower the prize. So, we lower it, lower some more... Still not approved.*

The second challenge is due to few inaccessible parts or functions of the software which they use during the course. In some issues, they manage to find a way to solve it even though it takes them some time, and sometimes end with failure.

> *Azman: I felt [the way the instructor taught us] is OK. ... We can understand it. Sometimes have to skip a little bit.*
>
> *Researcher: Which part he skipped?*
>
> *Adam: Parts that need sight... Maybe he is unable to explain in detail.*
>
> *Researcher: OK. When it involves sight, is it related to equipment or software?*
>
> *Adam: Software… The software is accessible for blind people, but there are things [we cannot do]…*

> *Researcher: So, you guys said that you have some problem with the software because it involves sight. ... How do you guys settle it? Did you find other ways? Or use other software as complementary?*
> *Azman: Sometimes we found it.*
> *Adam: Sometimes we found the ways. But it took [us] some time...*

The problem they have to face in respect to inaccessibility of certain functions in software used may suggest the current course fails to include the needs of persons with impairment, especially those who have a visual impairment. There is a specially designed curriculum for disabled students in primary and secondary schools under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. But, the Ministry of Human Resources may not share the same spirit to make appropriate adjustment onto the vocational and technical course syllabus under their certification. The situation also requires the creativity and sufficient training of the vocational instructors in overcoming such obstacle.

Listening to their challenges, we ask whether they, especially the instructor take any steps to overcome their problems, especially with regards to the insufficient equipment provision.

> *Azman: Right now, there is a group... wants to help us. But not sure whether we can get it.*
> *Adam: ... it was just recently. The group was just recently established. We don't know...*
> *Azman: For now they ask the quotation, we gave it. In order to establish a home studio.*
> *Adam: We gave [the quotation]. We see how is their feedback.*

It is also difficult for them to practice with the new knowledge they receive during the class since they do not own any equipment themselves.

> *Adam: One more thing, our field [audio production] need a lot of practice. So, sometimes there are somethings difficult to remember or cannot remember because lack of practice, we don't have our own equipment.*
> *Ibrahim: ... The classroom is locked. At night we cannot use it.*
> *Azman: 8 till 5. Then, we cannot use it.*
> *Adam: Trainees in other courses, if they want to do exercise, they can just do it...*
> *Azman: Laptop is there. Like us, we don't have our own equipment to use.*
> *Adam: Like IT trainees, they can explore their own laptop.*

Here, the center has to establish and work out some form of support mechanism for these trainees to be able to practice their skills. For instance, the center may loan software used for the course or extend the time of studio usage or open the studio during weekends. There must be a space for the trainees, instructor and the center management to discuss and put such a mechanism in place.

Our informants also tell us that they learn to handle analog-based equipment and not digital-based machines. Although analog-based equipment has its limitation, we learn that digital-based machines may cause some problem to visually impaired individuals.

> *Adam: ... for example, in an event, the audio equipment like mixer etc., we still use analog. ... they use digital. They can control. Then, they can save pre-set...*
> *Azman: Digital so far only software.*
> *Adam: For other equipment, our instructor was unsure. Because those things need sight.*
> *Ibrahim: Digital definitely is not accessible.*

With the advancement of technology, especially for visually impaired persons such as the audio-oriented technology and accessible touch screen technology, it is easy for us to forget that disabled people including those with visual impairment still face with inaccessible technology in today's world. In many products, machines and technologies, the concept of universal design is not widely integrated. Focus planning and action on this matter, apart other aspects of technical and vocational education, are still very far away from public consciousness. Hence, the academicians, organizations for and of blind people as well as the government have the duty to push forward this agenda.

Other than equipment and software, we are curious whether the training room provided to them are suitable for learning purposes. Our informants feel that though the studio provided by the center is moderately sufficient, there still need to improve the classroom facilities.

> *Adam: ... if possible the room should have more privacy. Because the microphone we use is sensitive... Even though the room is soundproof. But need more privacy. ... The spec has not reached the [standard] recording room level yet.*

In terms of support, our informants report that they receive good support from their instructor. This is exemplified during their efforts to complete their final year project, which is to produce a theme song for the vocational training center.

> *Adam: Support, the instructor did support. For example, cording for the song. We use the regular cord. He gave tips, after this [cord] then to this [cord]. Only then it sound differently. Usually [he taught] new cords, a new style of cording to apply in the song.*

Good interaction and support from vocational instructor can nurture, not only the trainees' skills, but also their psychological development. Combining with the attitude of the trainees, good interaction and support from their instructor can increase their confidence in themselves. Besides vocational instructor, good interaction and support must also happen in the workplace where the trainees do their internship. As part of their requirement in completing the course, they go for three weeks internship at a local studio. All three of them share positive experience from their internship.

> *Ibrahim: Best. Able to learn with someone considered as more professional. He [the employer] has vast experience... Able to see other people too. Before this, I never see the sighted person do it. So, able to gain experience there. He [the employer] showed how people in the industry use the equipment. ... although they use software which is not accessible for blind people, he still explained.*
>
> *Azman: Able to experience the real studio... drums, microphones... for vocal, they have a special room for it. Can feel all those expensive equipment. Get more knowledge... He taught us in more detail. Then, positioning, how to arrange the speakers.*
>
> *Adam: ... The experience was great... Besides that we learn about other software which we never use, never know about it. He [the employer] taught us new things about the software that we use daily... Got the opportunity to watch him do the recording for his clients...*
>
> *Azman: Before the recording starts, patching all the equipment, he allowed us to feel how to do it.*
>
> *Adam: For example, in the vocal room, he showed us the positioning of the microphone.*

Unfortunately, our informants share that they do not get the opportunity to conduct any recording project or involve directly in a recording session. They too have to bring one computer equipped with screen reader software since the studio where they go for internship do not own any screen reader software. Despite these obstacles, our informants seem very grateful and enjoy their experience at the studio.

They also have the chance to interact with the client who comes to the studio. It seems that the public still unaware of visually impaired individuals' capabilities to work in the audio production sector.

> *Ibrahim: They [the customers] were surprised. Because they never see blind people do this [job]. They were shocked. Blind people can do the recording. Our ears can listen accurately.*

Then, we turn the discussion to discuss the career opportunity. All three of them believe that visually impaired people have the potential to work in this area, but they also afraid of some possible risks.

> *Researcher: So, after completing this program, after a year and a half, then will graduate, Do you guys see the potential to work in this area? As a blind person...?*
>
> *Ibrahim: There is [potential]. But, the challenge is with the equipment. Different from other people out there [in the industry]. We have to find special [place] for our own. Maybe open our own production.*
>
> *Adam: The challenge is in terms of equipment. Then, the public also does not know that we [visually impaired people] can do this job. Like our own employer [at the workplace they did their internship] also shocked...*
>
> *Azman: I feel there is [potential]. But need to learn more. Now we have [the knowledge]. But need to achieve more...*

The informants also share their future plans with us. Some are considering to start a business, while others want to further their studies. From their responses, it seems they are still at the planning phase, uncertain of their future.

> *Ibrahim: Have a plan to find a little bit of money, want to buy equipment for ... to build my own home studio or cooperate with them [Azman and Adam].*
>
> *Adam: Same. Not sure whether want to continue [the study] or not. Not sure yet. For now, do what we can do. Busking etc.*
>
> *Azman: ... if possible, want to continue to diploma next year. Find some job at the same time...*

Our informants address few future recommendations to be considered by the vocational training center in order to increase the quality of the course. They suggest the application process must be more strict.

> *Researcher: You guys ... as graduates in this course, your opinion on how to improve this course for blind persons?*
>
> *Ibrahim: Organize an interview session. Because sometimes there are some people entering this course thinking only to learn about music. In truth, they do not know this course teaches you about recording. Not necessarily focusing on music. That part [music] is later, not the focus. Not the main focus.*
>
> *Adam: Have [some parts on] music. But we want to produce the music sound. Not play music. For some kids ... entering audio production for singing.*
>
> *Researcher: So, need to give briefing session....*
>
> *Ibrahim: Haa... briefing...*
>
> *Adam: Then, [conduct] audition. Meaning, after filling up the form, for this course must be more strict.*
>
> *Researcher: The conditions...*
>
> *Ibrahim: Because this course has to use a computer a lot. Afraid some blind persons they do not know or not skillful.*

Of course, one must have basic skills in using computer to be able to handle the equipment and software used in the course. Perhaps, besides enhancing admission process as suggested above, the center can also introduce some form of bridging course for those who want to learn audio production, but do not have the basic skills. With bridging course, we can tackle the issue of access and equity of disabled persons to enter a vocational training course. This also relates back to the need to establish appropriate support system and development of instructors' teaching capacities.

From our conversation with these young informants, we can see that the vocational course offers a positive experience to the trainees. However, the vocational training institution must give serious attention to learning support provision which is accessible to visually impaired people, as well on employability issue. The following section focuses on the recommendations by our informants in order to increase the participation of visually impaired persons in the audio production industry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the discussion, we ask our informants if they have any suggestions for the government, private sector, and Disabled People's Organizations on ways to increase the participation of visually impaired people in the audio production industry. Below are their suggestions:

i. The government must develop a policy which allocates a certain quota of job placement for visually impaired individuals in related private companies.
ii. Vocational training institution should provide sufficient equipment and software to enable effective learning.
iii. Disabled People's Organizations must give more opportunity to visually impaired individuals in handling audio production related tasks during the organizations' ceremonies and events.

In our efforts to include visually impaired individuals in a vocational training program, especially in a new area such as audio production, the training providers as well as the government must take into account the aspect of the course employability and marketability. The government must come out with a policy and related schemes to enable these individuals to be enrolled in a vocational training program that leads to gainful employment. We firmly believe that any person, including persons with visual impairment, have their rights to undertake vocational training in the field of their passion and then get a job from it. The policy and schemes can be in many forms, either directly benefit the individuals, or directly benefit the potential employers. Example of schemes that can give direct benefit to individuals includes equipment fund, business grants, and job placement quota as mentioned by our informants. Direct benefits for the potential employers can be in form of tax exemption, free publicity contract and so on.

On the other hand, private companies must move away from a disablist culture that sees disabled individuals of not able to perform well in audio production related tasks. Private companies must view the inclusion of visually impaired workers into their companies is worthwhile for business and for humanitarian agenda. Disabled People's Organizations can start by giving the opportunity to visually impaired individuals trained in this area to handle audio-related equipment for their ceremonies and events. This will indirectly promote the capability of these individuals to the public.

We would also like to enlist additional suggestions which can increase the involvement of visually impaired people in the audio production industry, or any disabled person into any vocational training program:

i. The government provides grants to encourage and sustain vocational training programs run by Disabled People's Organizations or any training institution in new industries;
ii. Researchers from local universities collaborate with Disabled People's Organizations to develop an accessible software or improve the accessibility aspect of the software used for learning purposes in vocational training program according to the needs and demands; and,
iii. Private companies provide financial assistance and an internship opportunity in developing vocational training programs run by Disabled People's Organizations or by any other training institutions.

CONCLUSION

Our three informants are really passionate about audio production and they do feel that blind individuals have the potential to work in this area. However, they have to face two major obstacles which are lack of equipment and inaccessible software. In their view, the former exists due to financial constraint. Our informants also report receiving good support from their instructor, as well from the employer during their three weeks internship. Furthermore, the public is still ignorant of visually impaired individuals' capabilities to work in this sector. At the end of this paper, we also discuss the recommendations voiced out by our informants with additional suggestions of our own. From our conversation with them, we also find that the vocational training institution should consider improving the training physical space to include a control room and recording room for their learning purposes, as well as making the application process more strict to increase the quality of the training course.

In doing this study, we realize that there is still too little empirical work on vocational training provision, either for visually impaired community or Malaysian disabled community as a whole. This may jeopardize: (i) The effectiveness of the vocational training provided to disabled individuals in this country; and, (ii) The employability and marketability rate of disabled vocational graduates. Therefore, we believe in the stronger emphasis on research and development, extracting both quantitative and qualitative data. On a broader note, any policy or action plan development, either for education or employment, for the general population or specific towards disabled people, must also include the needs of effective vocational education provision for disabled individuals.

The past literature suggests, and insofar as our own findings in this paper, there are several key points which are vital in providing employable and effective training to disabled persons. Those key points are accessibility, multidimensionality, individuals' needs, psycho-emotional and social gain, transition and multi-sectorial duty. There are also issues involving human resources (i.e. training for vocational instructors), logistics (i.e. sufficient provision of facilities, learning services, and equipment) and funding. This may help us to have a better understanding and conceptualization of the mechanisms to produce meaningful actions.

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