

# The implementation of a bakery sales project during the COVID-19 pandemic to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students

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**Abstract** During the COVID-19 pandemic, the practitioner and author of this practice in action took the initiative to carry out a piece of action research, by running a bakery sales project with Semai indigenous students. She found that running this project online and remotely was less successful than anticipated, due to the lack of physical proximity and issues with internet connectivity. Thus, in this practice in action, the resulting action research is discussed qualitatively and narratively, asking the following question: how can the practitioner enhance her practice as a special education teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making), to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students through a bakery sales project? The bakery sales project not only exposed students to the work environment, but also enabled the practitioner to improve her content knowledge and pedagogy, especially with regard to developing meaningful lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Employability; vocational skills; special education; indigenous students

## La implementación de un proyecto de venta de panadería durante la pandemia COVID-19 para mejorar la empleabilidad de los estudiantes indígenas Semai

**Resumen** Durante la pandemia de COVID-19, la profesional y autora de esta práctica en acción tomó la iniciativa de realizar una investigación-acción, mediante la ejecución de un proyecto de venta de panadería con estudiantes indígenas Semai. Descubrió que ejecutar este proyecto en línea y de forma remota fue menos exitoso de lo previsto, debido a la falta de proximidad física y problemas con la conectividad de internet. Así, en esta práctica en acción, la investigación-acción resultante se discute cualitativa y narrativamente, haciendo la siguiente pregunta: ¿Cómo la profesional puede mejorar su práctica como maestra de educación especial de Habilidades Vocacionales Específicas (Fabricación de Pan), para mejorar la empleabilidad de los estudiantes indígenas Semai a través de un proyecto de venta de panadería? El proyecto de venta de panadería no solo expuso a los estudiantes al entorno laboral, sino que también permitió a la profesional mejorar su conocimiento del contenido y la pedagogía, especialmente en lo que respecta al desarrollo de lecciones significativas durante la pandemia de COVID-19.

**Palabras clave:** Empleabilidad; habilidades vocacionales; educación especial; estudiantes indígenas.

## 1. Introduction

This practice in action discusses the practitioner's experiences of being a teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making) and conducting action research, through qualitative and narrative analysis. The practitioner, who is the first author of this study, carried out a bakery sales project with three Semai indigenous students. The second author of the practice in action is a critical friend of the practitioner, and their role is discussed in the methodology section. A narrative writing style is used because it plays an essential role in describing the action research process in detail. McNiff (2007) and Whitehead (1989) explain that narrative writing and action research are closely interrelated, as they enable the practitioner to recount their experiences of performing actions to improve self-practice. Thus, the use of the term practitioner in this practice in action is adapted to the narrative approach, as suggested by Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), Reason and Torbert (2001), and Stenhouse (1975).

Action research is a process that begins with a survey and evaluation of the past professional practices of the practitioner (McNiff, 2017). Kemmis et al. (2014) explain that the degree of survey and assessment in the initial stage of action research is a vital process for the practitioner to explore concerns, dissatisfactions, or issues in specific situations. Thus, this study begins with the survey and evaluation phase, to reflect on the professional practices of the practitioner, and to identify issues and challenges in the context of self-teaching. A discussion and analysis of the survey and initial evaluation phase discusses three aspects of the practitioner's professional practices, namely: (i) special education and vocational skills, (ii) the context of Semai indigenous students and their employability, and (iii) the teaching of current vocational skills in the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Issues and problems

### 2.1 Special education and vocational skills

"Where there is a will, there is a way" is a proverb that means success will not be achieved without desire and determination. This proverb is synonymous with the journey of the practitioner as a special education teacher who strives wholeheartedly to improve her teaching practices, due to not having a specific background in the field of special education. This field involves various categories of students, and it is thus presents challenges in providing them with meaningful and contextual teaching (O'Hanlon, 2009). Furthermore, the practitioner is responsible for handling the Specific Vocational Skills subject, a new curriculum introduced in 2017 as part of the Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) in Malaysia. Vocational skills are part of the special education curriculum, as drafted in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which seeks to provide alternative access to special education students to develop and diversify their interests and talents (MOE, 2013).

Schools are institutions that initiate the preparation of practical vocational training for special education students, to enable them to adapt to a situation in the workplace in the future (Mohamed Yusof et al., 2020; Zainun et al., 2020). Cannella and Schaefer (2015) also explain that when vocational skills are planned and implemented in school, students are better prepared to enter the world of work. In this regard, MOE, through its Blueprint, has planned to