

Enhancing Social Skills for Independent Living among People with Intellectual Disabilities: A Qualitative Perspective

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Abstract

Social skills play a vital role in enabling people with intellectual disabilities (PWID) to live independently and participate meaningfully in their communities. Despite growing awareness of independent living among PWID, the development of social skills as a pathway to empowerment remains underexplored. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to examine the types of social skills required by PWID to achieve independent living and enhance their quality of life. A total of 30 informants consisting of PWID, their mothers and teachers were involved in this study. The findings revealed four social skills necessary for independent living: communication skills, emotional expression, interpersonal relationship skills, and community engagement skills. These skills were found to be instrumental in fostering independence, self-confidence, and social inclusion among PWID. This research provides valuable insights for educators, families, and policymakers in designing targeted interventions and support systems to empower PWID through social skill enhancement.

Keywords: Social skills, Independent living, People with intellectual disabilities, Social competence, Empowerment

Introduction

Disability is a part of the human being as 1.3 billion people or equal to 16% of the global population nowadays comprise of people with disabilities (PWD) (World Health Organization 2021). United Nations (UN) defines persons with disabilities as any individual who has a physical, mental, intellectual or sensory deficiency that can cause obstacles to the individual and prevent their full involvement in society (CRPD 2015). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), disability is the result of the interaction between people with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, or depression, and personal and environmental factors, such as negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support. Some common types of disabilities include physical disability, vision impairment, deaf or hard of hearing, mental health conditions, acquired brain injury, autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability (Bianquin & Bulgarelli 2017).

Intellectual disability is one of the subcategories of disabilities where this term is used to describe anyone who has problems with their cognitive functioning and skills, such as their ability to communicate, get along with others, or take care of themselves (American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities 2022). According to the DSM-V issued by the American Psychiatric Association, intellectual disability refers to the neurodevelopmental disorders which start in childhood (American Psychiatric Association 2013). In Malaysia, intellectual disability refers to children five years or older who experience deficiencies in intellectual functioning or cognitive impairment (JKM 2020).

In discussing the issues faced by persons with disabilities around the world, attention is often emphasised on how people with disabilities are said to face injustice and oppression (Amin et al. 2019). Until now, persons with disabilities still face oppression in various aspects, whether in education, work or health, which negatively impacts their daily lives. The oppression often faced by persons with disabilities has caused them to become isolated from engaging and socialising with other community members and has subsequently contributed to the isolation. Persons with disabilities still have to deal with negative stereotypes, discrimination, poverty, and dropping out of school because of unfair situations, all of which have a negative effect on their daily lives (Aizan & Jamiah 2017; Björnsdóttir et al. 2017; Coleman et al. 2013). This dilemma has been going on for a long time, but because they are often thought of as a minority group, it is getting less and less attention in our society (Collier 2016).

A series of issues that are often faced by persons with disabilities has caused United Nations (UN) to come out with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as part of an intervention to deal with issues related to the oppression of people with disabilities (Watson et al. 2017). The UNCRPD, first developed in 2006, aims to promote, protect and ensure equal rights for all people with disabilities (Symeonidou 2015). The right of persons with disabilities to live independently has been clearly outlined in the UNCRPD where Article 19 states that persons with disabilities have the right to decide where and with whom they want to live (United Nations 2006). This right has given space to persons with disabilities to determine their own lives, make their own choices while the surrounding community only acts as a support system for persons with disabilities in achieving their life goals (Gooding 2018). The idea of independent living still causes public debate because there are opinions that persons with disabilities still need help from others in determining their own fate and life (Amin et al. 2020; Fullana et al. 2019). However, without us realising it, the inability to achieve self-determination also may impact the quality of life of PWID itself (Nota et al. 2007).

Quality of life focuses on an individual's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellness (Jackman et al. 2016). Social isolation and lack of access to self-determination can negatively impact the quality of life of PWID. Relating to that, it is suggested that increasing social activities and exercising independence should be recognised as fundamental components required to improve the quality of life of PWD (Razuvaeva et al. 2019). Therefore, independent living is seen as one of the relevant approaches in an effort to improve the quality of life for PWID.

Being able to live independently and having their own family is a hope and dream for most people with disabilities (Hendey & Pascall 2001) same goes with people with intellectual disabilities. However, some family members of people with intellectual disabilities often

doubt the ability of their children to live independently (Dorrell & Parston 2014). This doubt will become more worrisome when they see their child's cognitive skills and behaviour seem unsuitable for living independently as part of society (Gooding 2018). To live independently, an individual needs to possess certain skills to avoid encountering unfavourable circumstances in their daily lives. However, past study shows that people with intellectual disabilities who usually live isolated from society face limitations in mastering the adaptive skills needed to live independently (Ioanna 2018).

Regardless of the negative views on independent living among persons with disabilities, PWID still keeps hoping they will be given the opportunity to enjoy an independent life just like their peers. Given that being able to live independently is one of the main goals of persons with disabilities, thus there is a need to identify what skills are required by PWID to ensure that they are given the right to live independently. Previous empirical work has predominantly focused on the mastery of adaptive skills and activities of daily living (ADL) as prerequisites for independent living among PWID (e.g., King et al., 2017; Dell'Armo & Tassé, 2019). While critical, this emphasis often overlooks the non-functional, yet essential, mechanisms of social interaction. This study seeks to build upon existing knowledge by shifting the lens specifically to social skills, which are increasingly recognized as pivotal for enhancing social capital and achieving inclusive outcomes beyond basic self-care, thereby ensuring that the research contributes to a more holistic understanding of independence. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is still scarce information on the independent living skills needed by PWID. Thus, this paper aims to discuss what skills are required by PWID to live independently. The results will act as contributions that broaden knowledge on those mechanisms leading to improved quality of life of PWID

Methodology

This study was conducted in 2021 and employed a qualitative design to identify the skills PWID need to live independently. The choosing of this methodology was based on the justification that a qualitative study is a suitable study to be used to get an overview of a phenomenon, pattern and meaning of human behaviour in their social environment (Rubin et al. 2011). This study was conducted based on a case study approach, which is a study that does an in-depth description and analysis of the system being studied (Merriam 2009). The researcher chooses a case study approach because it allows the researcher to understand the meaning behind independent life among PWID more profoundly. At the same time, this approach also provides space for researchers to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the skills needed by PWID to live independently. This point is in line with the idea that case studies play a role in researching any behaviour or contemporary phenomenon identified as a case (Yin 2018).

Data Collection

This study's data collection involved two methods: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The first data collection process began with a semi-structured interview among 16 PWID from the selected vocational school in Malaysia or known as *Sekolah Menengah Pendidikan Khas Vokasional* (SMPKV). The second data collection process involved another focus group discussion session between the 11 teachers of the PWID. At the same time, the third process involved focus group discussions between three mothers of intellectual PWID students and the researcher.

The data collection process for this study has been carried out by relying on the study protocol developed by the researcher along with other research experts. This interview protocol is fundamental to the researcher in conducting a qualitative study because it acts as a guide and supplies the researchers to run the data collection session smoothly. Next, this interview protocol has been sent to the Ministry of Education for further review and approval. Once approval to use the study protocol was obtained, the researcher conducted the data collection process involving the study informants as listed.

Participants

Given that the objective of this study is to gain insights into the skills needed to live independently, the researchers chose to use a purposeful sampling technique where all the informants had to meet the inclusion criteria of this study. Purposive sampling is a technique where the researchers base their judgment on selecting a respondent and sample from a population according to the study's purpose (Schreier 2018). The informants for this study are selected based on the inclusive and exclusive criteria established in the preliminary stages of this study. As for PWID informants, the selection criteria for informants are as being 17 years old and above and living in the SMPKV dormitory for at least a year. It means that persons with disabilities under other categories (physical, various, auditory, visual and speech) and those under 17 years old will not be involved as informants in the semi-structured interview sessions.

As for the focus group discussion, the first session of the focus group discussion for this study involved teachers from four SMPKVs involved as the location of this study. The selection of informants for this focus group discussion is based on the criterion that the teacher must be directly involved in managing students with intellectual disabilities at SMPKV. Any teacher that does not involve in handling students with intellectual disabilities students will not be involved in the focus group discussions among these SMPKV teachers. At the same time, the second focus group discussion session involves focus group discussions carried out among mothers of PWID who have been involved in semi-structured conversations. It means mothers of students who are not involved in semi-structured conversations are not involved in this focus group discussion session.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this study has been carried out following the simultaneous data analysis procedure. Given that this study uses a qualitative research approach, part of the data analysis process has run along with the data collection process. While the interview was ongoing, the researcher had done preliminary analysis by writing memos and field notes which were eventually included in the final report of this study. After the entire data collection session has been carried out, this study enters the next stage, data analysis. The data obtained through the interview sessions and focus group discussions will then be transcribed before being entered into the Nvivo version 12.0 software. The use of the Nvivo version 12.0 software is seen to assist researchers in organising the study data before researchers analyse it into specific sections according to relevant themes.

Ethical Consideration

This research has been approved by the Secretariat of Ethics Research, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The ethics approval code for this study is JEP-2021-444. Apart from that, before

conducting the interview and focus group discussions with the informants, researchers provided an informed consent form that needed to be signed by each informant. This informed consent act as a formal agreement from the research participants to be involved with this study. This form also states that any information obtained by the researcher throughout this study is subject to ethics of confidentiality and is only used for academic purposes.

Results

Demographics of the Informants

This study involved a total of 30 informants. These 30 informants include 16 PWID who participated in semi-structured interviews, 11 teachers and three mothers of PWID who participated in focus group discussions.

For informants under the PWID category, eight 17-year-old PWIDs, three 18-year-old PWIDs, four 19-year-old PWIDs, and a 20-year-old PWID were interviewed for this study. Each PWID involved with this study has been asked to sign a letter of informed consent before the interview begins. For PWIDs under 18, their guardians have signed the informed consent letter indicating that they allow their dependents to participate in the study. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the information of the PWID involved as informants for this study.

Table 1

Information of PWID.

No	Nickname	Gender	Years living in dormitories	Specialisation at SMPKV
P1	Deja	Female	2	Food Preparation
P2	Yaya	Female	3	Food Preparation
P3	Mie	Male	5	Desktop Publishing
P4	Mat	Male	4	Desktop Publishing
P5	Mohd	Male	3	Food Management
P6	Jai	Male	2	Reflexology
P7	Aini	Female	2	Aesthetic Beauty
P8	Faiz	Male	2	Hair Dressing
P9	Bella	Female	3	Pastry Making
P10	Sarah	Female	2	Food Preparation
P11	Ijam	Male	2	Aquaculture
P12	Fad	Male	4	Aquaculture
P13	Ayu	Female	4	Food Preparation
P14	Iman	Female	3	Culinary
P15	Shafi	Male	2	Culinary
P16	Fifah	female	2	Pastry Making

Next, this study involved 11 teachers from SMPKV across Peninsular Malaysia with different teaching experiences. Four teachers were reported to have teaching experience in SMPKV between one to five years, two teachers with teaching experience between six to ten years, three teachers with teaching experience between 16 to 20 years and one teacher with teaching experience exceeding 20 years. At the same time, the teachers who are the informants of this study come from different role backgrounds. In summary, the 11 teachers involved with this study consisted of a chairperson, a science teacher, a counselling teacher,

four classroom teachers, and four teachers who acted as dormitory warden. **Error! Reference source not found.** below shows the information of the teachers involved as informants for this study.

Table 2

Information of Teachers.

No.	Nickname	Years serving PWID at School	Roles At School
G1	Teacher Noor	30	Headmaster
G2	Teacher Ara	15	Counseling Teacher
G3	Teacher Vie	6	Classroom Teacher
G4	Teacher Sofi	17	Classroom Teacher
G5	Teacher Sarah	16	Classroom Teacher
G6	Teacher Ema	3	Classroom Teacher
G7	Teacher Mas	3	Dormitory Warden
G8	Teacher Siti	1	Dormitory Warden
G9	Teacher Wan	1	Dormitory Warden
G10	Teacher Iss	6	Dormitory Warden
G11	Teacher Suzie	45	Science Teacher

At the same time, this study also involved three mothers as study informants. The selection of these three mothers as representatives of the family members who are the stakeholders of PWID. The three mothers involved were the mother of PWID who had been involved in the semi-structured interview sessions conducted in the previous stage. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the information of the PWID involved as informants for this study.

Table 3

Information of Mothers

No.	Nickname	Age	Occupation
M1	Mrs Ros	52	Housewife
M2	Mrs Ana	48	Clerk
M3	Mrs Kinah	54	Housewife

The results of this study have identified four social skills have been identified namely communicating, sharing feelings with others, establishing relationships, and engaging with the community.

Communication

The first subtheme under the social skills theme is the ability to communicate. To enable PWID to live independently, this study's informants believe that such PWID need the skills to communicate and initiate conversations with others. For example, there is a study informant who is also a mother shared that:

"... for me, communication is important. He's a person we can teach, he's a person who communicates, which means ask, don't be shy about not knowing or being lost if you ask, and hope that the person he asks doesn't like it, because some people don't like it when we ask. I speak close to him must communicate because if we communicate people understand what this side wants what this side wants I have spoken to him must communicate..."

Apart from that, the importance of mastering this communication skill was equally discussed by teachers to PWID students. For example, an informant who is also a teacher has shared an opinion stating:

"... Emphasise on the principles of communication, teamwork, personal behaviour, social media skills, leadership, decision making, influencing skills and many more principles of exposing students to the community before stepping into the realm of work..."

Communication skills are often acknowledged as necessary for PWID to live independently. In talking about communication skills, some informants of this study who are also teachers to PWID students stated that they often emphasise communication skills to their students in school. Teachers think that PWID students need to learn effective communication techniques because these students cannot avoid situations where they need to connect with people when

Emotional Expression

The following skill identified as the second subtheme in discussing the social skills required by PWID to live independently is the skill to share feelings with others. This study's informants thought it was essential for PWID to be able to share their feelings with others once they decided to live independently as part members of the community. For example, there are informants of this study who have stated that:

"...Okay then, in order to live independently, I think it's important to share our feelings with people we trust..."

"...when I being on my own I like to share my sadness with my family. Erm sometimes I suppress it there are times I share it with certain people only, yes with my dad..."

The ability to share feelings with others is also among the skills required by PWID who want to live independently. However, this study found that PWID students are more comfortable sharing their feelings with individuals they trust. Parents, family members, and teachers are listed as PWID's most trusted people. The ability of PWID to share their feelings with others was seen as an effective method in helping the PWD to enhance their critical thinking ability and simultaneously increase their creativity (Shah 2016).

Interpersonal Relationship Skills

An individual's ability to establish relationships with others is acknowledged as among the social skills required by PWID who want to live independently. The data analysis found that the informants of this study believed that PWID who want to live independently need to be trained to establish relationships with other people or make friends. For example, one informant stated:

"...Able to make friends with new people. Yes, I agree that also important. Because when living independently we need to work together and live in harmony..."

There are informants in this study who stated that in order to live independently, they also need to be able to establish relationships with other people. For PWID who settle down and stay with their family members, their chain of relationships only revolves around their family members. However, PWID who live independently needs to form wider social chains, which will require them to master skills in establishing relationships with others. In helping PWID

build relationships with others, parents need to play a significant role by adopting a more positive attitude in empowering their children to build new relationships (Neuman 2020).

Community Engagement Skills

The following social skill that has been identified as required by PWID to live independently is the skill to engage with the surrounding community, whether friends or neighbours. Informants of this study argue that independent living needs PWID to involve oneself and get along with the community. For example, there is an informant who is also a teacher who has shared that:

"...We train the boy to lead the evening prayer because when they live independently, they were prepared to blend with society. There is the simplest thing near the community that he will do every week..."

"...Another thing I always remind them is they have to join the community, which means they need to go to the community centre if there is an activity so that the communities will know them..."

At the same time, some mothers discussed exposure to society as one of the crucial skills PWID needs once they live independently. For example, an informant stated:

"... there are people who succeed in living independently by gain supporting from the surrounding community so that exposure to the community is important as well ..."

Engaging with the community is among the recognised skills needed by PWID to live independently. It is undeniable that to live independently, PWID cannot avoid involving themselves with the surrounding community.

Discussion

Social skills play a critical role in developing the human and social capital of people with intellectual disabilities (PWID), enabling them to participate meaningfully in community life and achieve greater independence. Within the framework of human capital development, social skills not only enhance individual functioning but also strengthen the collective capacity of society to promote inclusion, collaboration, and mutual respect. This study identified four main types of social skills essential for independent living among PWID: communication skills, emotional expression skills (sharing feelings with others), interpersonal relationship skills, and community engagement skills.

Among these, communication skills emerged as the most significant. Effective communication enables PWID to express their needs, convey opinions, and engage in reciprocal interaction. The finding that effective communication is fundamental for confidence and self-determination is substantiated by broader literature showing that communication competence can facilitate access to education and employment, thereby challenging occupational inclusion barriers (Hayward et al., 2018). This competency is fundamental in fostering confidence, assertiveness, and decision-making abilities involved qualities that contribute to individual empowerment and self-determination (Hayward et al., 2018). In the context of human capital development, communication competence can also facilitate access to education, training, and employment opportunities, thereby enhancing PWID's social and economic participation.

In addition, the ability to share emotions and feelings or emotional expression is crucial in promoting psychological well-being and emotional intelligence. Being able to express

emotions appropriately allows PWID to manage interpersonal conflicts, seek social support, and develop self-awareness. The ability to express emotions appropriately is essential for seeking social support. This aligns with previous qualitative findings suggesting that sharing feelings is effective in enhancing critical thinking and creativity among young people with learning difficulties (Shah, 2016). These emotional competencies are increasingly recognised as core components of social capital, which underpin cooperative relationships and community resilience.

Interpersonal relationship skills were also highlighted as essential for sustaining long-term relationships, whether within the family, workplace, or community settings. Developing these skills enables PWID to build networks of trust and reciprocity which is the key elements in social integration and inclusion (Raghavendra et al., 2015). Developing these skills to build networks of trust and reciprocity is a key element in social integration. This finding is reinforced by studies showing that support in forming relationships, often championed by parents (Neuman, 2020), is vital for reducing dependency and motivating self-management. The presence of supportive relationships can also reduce dependency and increase motivation towards self-management and independent living.

Lastly, community engagement skills empower PWID to participate actively in communal activities and civic responsibilities. Involvement in community-based programmes, volunteerism, or advocacy initiatives strengthens social belonging and encourages active citizenship. From the perspective of social development, such engagement not only benefits PWID but also fosters an inclusive community that values diversity and mutual contribution. In conclusion, social skills are more than just interpersonal competencies, they represent the foundation of human and social capital for PWID. By strengthening communication, emotional, relational, and community engagement skills, PWID can experience enhanced autonomy, social inclusion, and overall quality of life. This active participation in communal activities strengthens social belonging. This aligns with international empirical findings, such as those in Greece, which found that receiving support from the surrounding community is a crucial factor contributing to the successful independent living of individuals with intellectual disability (Ioanna, 2018). These skills contribute directly to the development of inclusive human resources and sustainable social systems, aligning with broader national and global goals of equality, empowerment, and social participation.

Limitations and Suggestions

Undoubtedly, there will always be constraints in performing a study, and so is the case with this research. Given that this study involves those who are diagnosed as having an intellectual disability, the researcher has faced the obstacle of getting informants who are in line with the objectives of this study as most of them are hesitant to engage with this study. Although the researchers have managed to get a number of PWID to be research informants, not all of these informants could answer the questions the researcher asked. In light of this, the researchers needed to restructure the question protocols to ensure they could easily understand and answer the questions asked by the researcher. In addition, this study only focused on people with intellectual disabilities even though there are different forms of learning disabilities as outlined by the WHO. In light of this, it is suggested that future studies include other categories of learning disabilities so that a comparative study can be conducted to discuss the skills required by PWD to live independently.

Implications

This study could be utilised as a new source of reference for PWID, families and communities in understanding the concept of independent living. Apart from that, the results and discussions stated in this study can also be used as a guide for persons with disabilities especially PWID to fight for the equal rights they deserve and thus prevent them from facing any form of discrimination. This matter is in line with UNCRPD which aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination against persons with disabilities. This study's findings can assist family members, particularly parents, in teaching and equipping their children with the necessary skills and empowering them towards independent living.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study contributes new insights into the importance of social skills in enabling people with intellectual disabilities (PWID) to live independently. The findings highlight that social skills such as communication, emotional expression, interpersonal relationships, and community engagement is crucial for empowering PWID to participate actively in social life and make autonomous decisions. PWID deserves the right to actively participate in social life just like the others, therefore a continuous and structured training that focuses on strengthening their social skills is needed as a part of efforts in preparing PWID towards independent living. By enhancing these skills, PWID can improve their confidence, build supportive relationships, contribute meaningfully to their communities and ultimately leading to better quality of life and greater empowerment.

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