

Working Ability among Students with Learning Disabilities Enrolled in TVET Education: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

The working ability of students with learning disabilities refers to their ability to engage in work activities that involve skills, knowledge, and abilities relevant to the chosen field of work. This study conducts a preliminary study of the ability to work among students with learning disabilities in Technical and Vocational Education (TVET). This study aims to analyze the extent to which of these students can adapt to the skills and knowledge taught in the TVET program as well as to identify the challenges they faced in the learning and training process. This study used qualitative approach to collect the data. The methodology of this study involves data collection through interviews with three teaching staff from students with learning disabilities at Banting and Batu Caves PPKI schools, as well as the Mentari Training Center at Hospital Universiti Sains Malaysia (HUSM) Kubang Kerian. This study used application software of Nvivo 12.0 to analyze and prepared the coding for the theme and sub theme of the result. A total of three study participants consisting of teaching staff for learning disabilities students were involved in this study. The results of this study show that students with learning disabilities can understand the instructions and be able to carry out the tasks that have been given with an excellent outcome. Their attitude which is more focused on work makes them able to complete tasks in a shorter time. This finding proves that students with learning disabilities have the ability to work in the industry that gives them ample opportunities to work. These preliminary findings are expected to provide guidance for program coordination and better support for students with learning abilities to matching their ability with the job profile in the workforce with the context of TVET industry and education.

Keywords: Working Ability, Students with Learning Disabilities, TVET Educ

Introduction

Malaysia is currently working to support the recommendations outlined in the SDGs that were introduced in 2015 to ensure sustainable development can be implemented to secure natural resources for future generations. SDGs 4: Quality Education highlighted a quality education for all levels of society including special education students with learning disabilities. The population of individuals with learning disabilities is increasing every year based on statistics from the Department of Social Welfare.

In relation to that, every country is heading towards economic recovery after the covid19 pandemic, including in Malaysia. Job opportunities are also increasing since many sectors have opened businesses and require a large workforce to support the operation of the organization. However, career opportunities for people with disabilities are still at a low level. This is supported in the 2020 TVET Graduate Tracking Report. A total of 429 graduates has a disabled status, which is 0.5 percent of all TVET graduates in 2020. Community colleges recorded the largest number of disabled graduates, namely 154 graduates, followed by polytechnics (133 graduates), ILKA KPLB (111 graduates), ILKA KSM (16 graduates), ILKBS and vocational college with 7 graduates each. (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, 2021).

Therefore, efforts to empower TVET by integrating vocational skills to special education students can be seen to help students to be more skilled and have added value with vocational skills that match the student's interest and competence in performing jobs. Individuals with learning disabilities have the potential to be good technical field workers for the operational level of the organization. This is because most of the behavior of individuals with learning disabilities is that they are less comfortable to mix with the surrounding community (Avellone et al., 2021). According to previous studies, it has also been found that individuals with learning disabilities are also able to become good researchers and analysts if the teaching and learning methods given to them are appropriate to the individual's level and abilities (Anderson et al., 2022). Individuals with learning disabilities actually have their own advantages and disadvantages that can be used as their strength to face an increasingly challenging world.

Therefore, this field study was carried out to explore the causes and why the problem continues and has not yet found the best solution in the issue of failure of students with learning disabilities to get a job even though there have been many government initiatives and statutory bodies involved to open up job opportunities for the with these special needs. The objective of this study is to find out the extent to which students with learning disabilities work

The Working Ability of Individuals with Learning Disabilities

The subject of employment and disability is presently a subject of significant discussion and analysis among policy makers and practitioners in Malaysia. The subject of employment and disability is presently a subject of significant discussion and analysis among policy makers and practitioners in Malaysia (Manaf et al., 2019) . This is due to a growing awareness of the obstacles encountered by people with disabilities when entering the workforce. This awareness is due in large part to the campaigns of the disability movement, which have resulted in significant policy developments in this area over the past decade (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Recent studies conducted in the United Kingdom indicate that "misconceptions about their abilities" and lack of awareness among employers and the general public of their requirements and abilities limit the employment opportunities of people with disabilities. (Evans & Holt, 2017)

Unfortunately, a notable drawback exists in the form of insufficient and uniform national statistics pertaining to employment and unemployment rates within the disabled population. This dearth of information poses a significant obstacle to the comprehensive monitoring of the present circumstances. Nevertheless, the problem of unemployment among this demographic has been perceived as an ongoing and persistent challenge in Malaysia (Fatimah et al., 2020). In contexts where a historical absence of work practices and limited legal protections for those with disabilities exist, there has been a significant dependence on employers' benevolence to provide access to employment possibilities (Morningstar et al., 2017). It is crucial to comprehend the constraints associated with this particular methodology within a broader framework characterized by prevalent biases towards the capabilities of this demographic and, as a result, restricted prospects for employment (Fernandez et al., 2023). The rate of employment among individuals with impairments continues to be significantly low.

The crisis of joblessness among disabled people is particularly acute for persons with learning disabilities and most of them are either placed in sheltered employment or remain at home without paid work (Arnidawati & Abdullah, 2020). This is due to assumptions that are made about their intellectual limitations as well as their lack of suitable education and vocational training.

The employment opportunities for persons with learning disabilities are mostly limited to unskilled or non-professional jobs such as production operators, handicraft, general workers, shop assistants, gardeners and cleaners or other work that does not require more than basic communication or interpersonal skills (Isa et al., 2009). Moreover, they are often being paid on piece-rates as they are assumed to be less productive than other non-disabled workers. As a result, they are frequently on a low wage and in addition, may earn less than other people including other groups of disabled employees.

A range of reports have drawn attention to the poor employment opportunities and high unemployment rates among persons with learning disabilities. The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Kementerian Sumber Manusia, 2020) reported that persons with learning disabilities face considerable challenges as they attempt to get a job after completing their secondary education. Reports from the self-advocacy groups of persons with learning disabilities in Malaysia stated that 29 to 55 per cent of their members are unemployed (Islam & Cojocar, 2015). According to (Chen et al., 2007) reported that persons with learning difficulties had the lowest rates of employment of any other group of persons with disabilities in Malaysia. In addition, a survey of 218 adults with learning disabilities in Penang reported that 55 per cent of those who participated had had no work experience at all. Of the rest, almost 25 per cent worked in the sheltered workshops, five percent in family businesses and only nine per cent had worked in the wider community or open employment (Harun et al., 2020). Supported employment is seen as one means to enable people with learning disabilities to access mainstream employment but this approach has been introduced only recently and is not fully practiced yet. There is still a lack of supported employment options with appropriate supports such as job coaches.

Some persons with learning disabilities tried to move forward to integrate in the community by participating in the mainstream workforce. This appears to support the views that given the appropriate support and a suitable job many persons with learning disabilities are able to enter mainstream employment. Their employability was further demonstrated when a hypermarket started to employ 13 employees with learning disabilities in 2007 and increased the number to 82 within two years (Hiller et al., 2007). As there has been positive feedback

on this first wave of recruitment, more retail employers have followed this company's lead by opening more job opportunities for people with learning disabilities.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to explore the ability to work among individuals with learning disabilities. Trochim (2006) asserts that qualitative research is characterized by its flexible study design, as it does not prescribe particular guidelines about the nature and methodology of the research. According to Robson, posits that the qualitative research design undergoes a process of development and expansion as the study progresses. Interviews are conducted as a means of gathering data from study participants. This research employs interview techniques to get primary data from study participants (Robson, 2002). A total of three study participants have agreed to cooperate in conducting this study. After completing the process of interviewing the study participants, data transcripts were carried out for all informants. After completing the interview data transcription process, the data was analyzed using Nvivo 12.0 software to obtain themes and sub-themes from each study participant's transcript. Then, the coding process is carried out by organizing each theme based on the data obtained from the study participants.

Profile of Study Participants

A total of three study participants were interviewed to find out what the elements of the working ability of students with learning disabilities in educational and training institutions are for each study participant. Among the criteria for the study participants are, (i) having experience teaching students with learning difficulties for a minimum of 10 years of experience, (ii) being one of the teaching staff at a Special Education school or Training Center for the Disabled and (iii) being able to assess the ability of students under supervision and monitoring of study participants. All the criteria of participant can refer to Table 1.

The first study participant (PK1) from HUSM's sun training center, Kubang Kerian Kelantan. She is a vocational skills trainer in the field of bread making and bakery. She is also a psychiatric counselor who helps people with special needs to gain skills so that they can be independent to get a job or become an entrepreneur. Study participants have experience working at HUSM Mentari Training Center for 10 years.

Second study participants (PK2) from secondary schools that have a Special Education Program for Integration (PPKI) in Batu Caves. She has 5 years of experience teaching special education students and 9 years of experience teaching at Vocational Colleges in the field of food and beverage preparation and manufacturing. The skills gained from the TVET field are applied to special education students to provide added value to students with special needs. The third study participant (PK3) is also from a secondary school that has a Special Integration Education Program (PPKI) in Banting. Overall, she has had 15 years of experience in the field of education, and 13 years in the field of special education. She has skills in the field of bread making and bakery. She teaches bread making skills to special education student.

Table 1

Criteria of participant

	PK1	PK2	PK3
Years of experience	10 years	14 years	15 years
Position	Vocational skill trainer	Teacher	Teacher
Working place	Mentari Training Center	PPKI Batu Caves	PPKI Banting

Result and Discussion

The results of the study show that there are some elements that show the ability of students with learning disabilities to work in the industry, but there are some obstacles and challenges that can be identified that hinder efforts for these students with special needs to gain trust from all walks of life.

Student Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy pioneered by Albert Bandura has an important effect on individual motivation, seriousness, and confidence. Pajares (1997) found that self-efficacy can have an impact on choices made, efforts made, and perseverance in the face of challenges, resistance, stress and anxiety. Furthermore, Wang and Pape (2007), stated that students with high self-efficacy have more potential to succeed in their academics. For students with special needs, self-efficacy is divided into three groups, namely high, medium and weak.

For students with high self-efficacy, learning disabilities students can independently perform tasks without much guidance from their teachers or friends (Opoku, 2022). In addition, they can also master technical skills in the field of skills they learn in school. Students with learning disabilities who have high self-efficacy are able to produce soft and delicious bread. This is because they can master the skills of making bread well (Alvanoudi et al., 2023). Next, these students have a high interest in learning and also, they are smart in controlling their emotions. They are very interested in learning skills because they see the results of the activities that have been implemented. They are also good at controlling their emotions where they can resist being active in class by jumping up and down but to prevent this from happening, they will try to just sleep in class. Special education teachers also understand the situation and let students sleep alone for a while. Once they manage to control themselves, only then will they resume the task that has been delayed.

For students who have moderate efficiency, they often experience poor memory. They will easily forget for the things they rarely done; therefore, the teacher will prepare a card for each student as a reference for them to remember when the activity is often done in class. In addition, they also need guidance from the teacher to complete an assignment (Ebersold et al., 2011). They will always be monitored by the teacher. Students in this stage are also unable to control their emotions. They would scream and run around the class. Their condition depends on emotions. Students with learning disabilities can behave well such as listening to instructions, sometimes they do not manage to control their emotions (Sutcliffe & Radonovich, 2023). Most students in this stage show interest in learning and working in the workplace.

For students with weak learning problems, they focus more on self-management only and are not suitable to be offered work because their abilities are very weak. They also lack self-confidence and often suffer from health problems (Martinelli et al., 2022). Most of them

come to school just to meet the daily routine but none have the goal of learning skills like their friends at medium and high level.

In addition to the three groups, students with learning disabilities have their own unique attitudes and each of them has different capabilities and abilities. They will prefer verbal instructions and like to do the same work over and over again. Students also have a deep interest when learning a new skill. Some of these students also need to depend on medication for the rest of their lives. The medication that needs to be taken helps students to reduce the effects of aggressiveness and excessive emotions.

Generic Skills

In the context of the education system in Malaysia, among the generic skills that students need to possess are communication skills, skills in using technology, skills in planning and managing activities, skills in working with others and in groups, problem solving skills, managing skills, choosing and analyzing information, skills using mathematical ideas and techniques and cultural skills (Kenayathulla et al., 2019)

Among the generic skills that can be identified among students with learning disabilities is that they are able to solve problems if there are problems while carrying out the tasks given to them. If students can understand the correct process and procedure when making bread dough, they will be able to know how to fix dough that is too soft by adding flour to the dough to get a more accurate dough texture (Ahmad et al., 2020).

Some of these students can communicate well and listen to instructions easily. The tolerant and responsible attitude shown by each student will also be evaluated by the teacher and the teacher will record each student's progress. This generic assessment will take place from the first year the student enters class until the student finishes learning at school.

Technical Skills

In technical skills, this is more geared towards the skills of the field that the student ventures into. To equip students with learning problems with technical skills, teachers must also have high skills in the technical field taught to students. Pedagogical skills to manage special education students are also necessary but skills in technical fields that focus on preparing students for industry are also very important (Pontes et al., 2021). This is because technical skills are very much needed by critical fields that receive less response from normal graduates. For example, in the field of food service itself, there are many opportunities that are not filled by graduates who have a bachelor's degree because the job is not suitable for their level of qualification.

In addition, technical evaluation is also carried out for students with learning problems to find out the level of students' ability and abilities, is it in line with the needs and requirements of the industry (Kocman & Weber, 2018). According to PK3, before technical and vocational education elements were introduced into special education, students were not assessed systematically using the Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) assessment system from the Skills Development Department (JPK). Good student results show that teachers have high technical skills. Dedicated teachers are also able to foster students' interest in the skills taught with various approaches that can attract students' interest

Parental Beliefs

The parents' belief in the abilities of their special children also plays an important role for these learning disabilities to be able to work in the industry. According to the experience of

PK3 and PK2, there are a few parents who do not allow their children to work even though their children have been offered to work at McDonalds.

Parents are worried about putting their children in the dormitory under the supervision of the employer's organization because their children have to take medicine every day and they are worried that their children will not be able to manage themselves well (Stefanidis et al., 2022). Such situations should be avoided among parents where parents should give full trust and support to help their children become more independent in the future.

According to PK1, students who have good development in terms of attitude and behavior will be considered to be given hands-on skills training so that students can compete with normal students to get a job. Support from every family member can support the development of these special needs people so that they can be independent in the future. Many parents expect their children to be independent with support from all parties, whether the government or employers.

Employer Trust

The skills training given to all learning disabilities students is aimed at gaining the trust of employers to be interested in accepting these learning disabilities students as employees in their organization (Helena et al., 2023). In order to gain the trust of the employer, this can be realized by carrying out industrial training for learning disabilities students so that the employer can assess for themselves the extent of the student's performance as a preparation before entering the world of work (Vashishth & Jhamb, 2021). According to PK2 and PK 3, they strongly agree with the plan in order to give students exposure to the real working environment. This will give more motivation to students because they are used to the work environment and do not feel awkward to adapt in a new place.

Interview methods for students with learning disabilities can also be varied apart from assessing communication and personal appearance, assessment based on completing tasks can also provide opportunities for students who lack communication skills but more on technical skills such as napkin folding skills and cooking skills. Most applied technical skills require less communication skills. Based on the study of (Albright et al., 2020), it shows that employers like this individual learning problem because they are able to make dish decorations uniformly for a large amount. Normally, the banquet party at the hotel will accept food banquet orders for many guests, therefore with the presence of employees who are able to decorate the dishes uniformly, this makes the employer satisfied with the employee's performance even if the employee is a learning disabilities employee. This study proves that mild autism can also get a job that matches the working ability of individuals with learning disabilities.

Conclusion

Employment is an important thing to ensure the well-being of a person's life, even more meaningful for individuals with learning disabilities. Most individuals with special needs can perform well and be productive like other typical workers if they are given the knowledge and skills that meet the employer's needs through appropriate educational programs. Thus, individuals with special needs who work can contribute to the development and generation of the country's economy and get a better quality of life for individuals.

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