



A Narrative Study: Career Counselling Service among Persons with Disabilities at Vocational Centre in Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

Career development embodies a disposition of career maturity, requiring individuals to comprehend the developmental tasks and responsibilities they must undertake. Central to this journey is career counselling. This study focuses on Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). This narrative study highlights the significance of career counselling as the intervention for PWDs' career development at vocational centres. Out of 637537 registered PWDs under the Social Welfare Department, less than 12,000 registered PWDs are employed, as stated in the Malaysian Employer Federation report on November 2023. Therefore, this study uses narrative research focusing on conducting semi-structured interviews. The participants in this study consist of two PWDs: one with physical disabilities and one with learning disabilities. Through this exploration, the study aims to shed light on the challenges faced by each PWD in accessing career support and inform future interventions to promote PWDs vocational success and social inclusion. This study suggests that career counselling services are crucial for supporting the career development and self-concept of PWDs. This underscores the need for interventions to improve access to such services and promote the vocational success of PWDs.

Keywords: person with disabilities, career development, career counselling, vocational centre

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1 INTRODUCTION

Career development spans a lifetime, covering our initial thoughts about work in childhood through to our initial job, advancements, and potential retirement. World Health Organization (2023) reported that approximately 16% of the world's population, equivalent to an estimated 1.3 billion people, consists of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), and 2 to 4% face significant functioning challenges. This means that the remaining percentage comprises PWDs who can function adequately. In Malaysia, PWDs are not mandated to register under the Department of Social Welfare (JKM). Nevertheless, as of January 2023, there were 637,537 registered PWDs under JKJ. However, only 4,500 PWDs were employed in the public and private sectors, constituting only 1% of the registered PWDs in Malaysia (National Health & Morbidity, 2019). In the Public Services Commission report, statistics reveal that out of 3777 civil job applications by PWDs, only 1008 PWDs were called for an interview, and only 71 PWDs were employed (Code Blue, 2023). This demonstrates a significant degree of exclusion PWDs face during the initial application stage, often preventing them from advancing to the interview phase. Mary Chen, President of the Challenges Foundation, stated that only 0.003 per cent of PWD are employed in the public sector and 0.001 per cent in the private sector as of 2018 (Suhaimi, 2020). This indicates that PWDs are not fully benefiting from the government initiatives, which allocate at least 1% of job opportunities in the public sector for PWDs as stated in the affected circular (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2010)

In a broader global context, the United States Bureau of Labour Statistics reported that in 2022, the unemployment rate among individuals with disabilities decreased to 7.6 per cent, marking a decline of 2.5 percentage points from the previous year as of 23 February 2023. The federal government of the United States also designed a program to ensure PWDs could work. Based on the United States Office of Personnel Management's official website, the Federal Government is proactively engaging in the recruitment and employment of PWDs. They provide enticing job opportunities, competitive pay scales, outstanding benefits, and chances for PWDs' career development. The process of hiring PWDs for Federal positions is swift and straightforward. Through a method known as Schedule A, PWDs can secure Federal jobs without competing against others. This emphasises a shared commitment between Western nations and Malaysia to supporting Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) to secure employment. While Western countries, such as the United States, have demonstrated proactive strategies for improving employment opportunities for PWDs, Malaysia has yet to find a comprehensive solution to this extensively discussed issue. The lack of empirical understanding regarding career counselling services as the intervention for the career development of PWDs represents a significant knowledge gap. This study highlights the need to identify barriers hindering PWDs' access to vocational centres, as there are limited vocational centres for PWDs. It proposes recommendations to improve the accessibility and utilisation of vocational centres for PWDs in Sarawak (Edison, 2021). Moreover, in the realm of counselling, this study aims to evaluate the current state of career counselling services at vocational centres and pinpoint areas for improvement to support the career development of PWDs. By doing so, it seeks to provide valuable insights for crafting more inclusive policies and programs that cater to the needs and preferences of PWDs in vocational centres.

Additionally, this study aims to explore how several types of disabilities influence career development factors among PWDs and assess the effectiveness of counselling services tailored to several types of disabilities.

The Malaysian Social Welfare Department (JKM) has over ten vocational centres. However, Sarawak has a solitary vocational centre, the Special Needs Excellence Centre (SNEC) in Samarahan. According to the statistical report, 42,774 registered PWDs in Sarawak were under JKM as of January 2023. The ratio of one vocational centre to this considerable number, 42774, is notably substantial. Additionally, despite SNEC having 100 available slots for PWD trainees, they received fewer than 30 applications from PWDs. As highlighted, the substantial gap between the existing resources and the actual utilisation underscores this research's need to identify barriers hindering PWDs from accessing vocational training opportunities. Vocational for PWDs under JKM prioritises conventional job-related skills, encompassing handicrafts, carpentry, sewing, cooking, and farming skills (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2024). Moreover, Datuk Seri Fatimah Abdullah stated that discussions are underway at the state government level to assess the feasibility of establishing a school or vocational complex for PWDs. Dougherty and Lombardi (2016) stated that programmes focused on vocational training, such as career technical education and community-based experiences, are frequently designed without considering the needs of individuals with and without disabilities.

This study does not differentiate the types of disabilities. Seven categories of PWDs may be considered for registration by the JKM. These categories encompass individuals with hearing, visual, speech, physical, mental, and multiple disabilities. PWDs are classified into severity levels within each category, including severe, moderate, and mild (Regier et al., 2013). Aga Mohd Jaladin et al. (2023) suggested that the lack of representation of various disabilities brings sampling limitations to the generalizability of research. To provide further rationale, Grzeskowiak et al. (2021) conducted a study in Finland and Poland comparing co-worker's attitudes towards several types of disability. When it comes to being open to hiring people with disabilities, those with cognitive disabilities, it was less favourable for employment opportunities in Poland. This is validated by Corrigan et al. (2008) and Vornholt et al. (2017), indicating that the type of disability significantly affects employment prospects. Therefore, this research did not specify the types of disabilities that differentiate the needs of PWDs.

The accessibility of career counselling services at vocational centres for PWDs raises uncertainty. In Malaysia, the full utilisation of registered counsellors has not been realised, even though there have been 11,017 registered counsellors since July 2023. Aligning with the Minister of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development statement, Datuk Seri Rina Harun's targeted ratio is one registered counsellor for every 500 residents (Mohamad & Basaruddin, 2022). Under the Social Welfare Department (JKM), the registered counsellor is located at the head office, while the job coach is responsible for supporting PWDs. Job Coach Programme is a project to support the participation of PWDs (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2024). It is a collaborative project between the Department of Social Welfare and the Japan International Cooperation Agency. In counselling, some scholars and researchers view career counselling, mainly when working with PWDs, as a form of career rehabilitation (Strauser, 2014). Career counselling services for PWDs aim to emphasise their abilities, enhance customer service skills, reduce

financial dependence, promote social integration, and enhance overall functioning. Past literature reviews have revealed a lack of extensive research on the perceptions of PWDs regarding career counselling services.

Chao et al. (2022) discovered that social support primarily contributes to career decision self-efficacy among college students with disabilities (CSWD). According to Skinner (2004) and Ahmed et al. (2023), social support from various sources, including family, friends, instructors, and academic services such as disability services, is crucial in helping CSWDs' career development. Moreover, Chao et al. (2022) further demonstrated that increased affirmation and commitment to ethnic identity by CSWD positively influenced their career decision self-efficacy. This observation is supported by Mejia and Gushue (2017), who found that Latina college students who took pride in their ethnic identity of Asian-American college students contribute to an enhancement in their career decision self-efficacy. In the Malaysian context, Aga Mohd Jaladin et al. (2023) highlighted the limitation of their studies: their findings on PWDs cannot be generalised across the population as there was no representation of the Chinese ethnicity. This reveals a constraint in the field of employment for PWDs in Malaysia, specifically related to ethnic identities. Despite an extensive review of past literature in Malaysia, it is noteworthy that no specific findings have addressed how the ethnicity of PWDs could impact their career development.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study used a narrative approach and qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews with PWDs at vocational centres affiliated with the Social Welfare Department in Sarawak. Spencer and Spencer (2013) in Creswell and Creswell (2018) argued that eight participants are deemed sufficient to obtain quality qualitative data, while Creswell and Creswell (2018) encourage samples of five and above. Determining the final sample size will also consider data saturation, where information received aligns with existing data, and no themes emerge. However, in this study, two PWDs were involved in this preliminary data collection.

The researcher obtained authorisation from the JKM via their official website, underscoring the importance of securing access to research or archival sites through gatekeepers. These gatekeepers play a pivotal role in granting access and permitting the research. Consequently, this research sought permission through the 'my research' website under the JKM Malaysia portal.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the rationale behind qualitative research involves intentionally selecting participants, sites, or other elements, such as documents or visual materials, that are more conducive to the researcher's understanding of the problem and research question. This does not imply using random sampling or including many participants and chosen site. There are four key aspects to consider: (a) the setting, where the research will occur; (b) the actors, who will be observed or interviewed; (c) the events, what the observed or interviewed actors will be doing, and (d) the process, the dynamic nature of events unfolding within the setting.

Below are the inclusion criteria:

- i. Must be registered as a PWD under Jabatan Kebajikan Malaysia.
- ii. A trainee at a vocational centre under Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat Sarawak.
- iii. This study does not differentiate between several types of disabilities.
- iv. Participants with learning disabilities must submit a Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) report indicating a mild disability level.
- v. Participants must be able to comprehend questions prepared for the study

Based on the participants selected by the officers, the researcher double-checked to ensure they met the specified criteria. The researcher then analysed the documents and observed the specific behaviours of the two participants. They were interviewed individually as they had diverse types of disabilities. Based on the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2017), the researcher prioritised obtaining informed consent from PWD before they participated in this study. The researcher visited the vocational centre twice to ensure that research procedures were accessible. Additionally, when interviewing participants with learning disabilities, researchers arranged for the presence of a teacher to assist with their communication needs. Researchers also use respectful language to avoid stigmatising or labelling participants based on their disability. The data analysis procedure was adapted from the Creswell model of qualitative data analysis. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasise the importance of approaching qualitative data analysis as a systematic process that unfolds through sequential steps, moving from specific to general and encompassing levels of analysis. Here are the outlined steps in this study:

- i. Organize and prepare the data for analysis
- ii. Examine all data
- iii. Coding all data
- iv. Interrelating themes
- v. Interpreting the meaning of the theme

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section covers the demographic information of the participants and the data analysis methodology employed, focusing on the Thematic Analysis.

Table 1. Demographics of participants.

Participant (P)	Type of disabilities	Gender	Age	Race	Family income level	Programme
P1	Physical	Female	21	Bumiputera Sarawak	B40	Sewing
P2	Learning disability	Male	21	Malay	B40	Electronic

Table 1 displays the demographic information of the participants in this study. The table indicates two participants: P1, who has a physical disability, and P2, who has a learning disability. Additionally, P1 identifies as female and is of Bumiputera Sarawak ethnicity, while P2 is male and of Malay ethnicity. Both participants are 21 years old and are currently enrolled in vocational education under the Social Welfare Department in Sarawak. Furthermore, both participants come from B40 families. This study aims to address physical and cognitive disabilities without distinguishing between them. According to the findings, participants with physical (P1) and learning disabilities (P2) share similar perceptions regarding the role of their teacher as a career advisor. Participant 1 expressed, "...my teacher is the one who recognises my potential because I wanted to join a computer program, but she believes that I am more suitable for a sewing program." Similarly, participant 2 stated, "...my teacher helps me to do things beyond my abilities, like reciting prayers at every assembly, which helps me to be confident."

However, there are differences in how participants with diverse types of disabilities understand the interview questions. P1, who has physical disabilities, can comprehend the questions coherently. In contrast, P2, who has learning disabilities, has limited focus when answering the questions. Although P2 understands the questions, he tends to diverge from the interview questions and discuss other topics more extensively. P2 has been diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder, which makes it challenging for him to grasp the research questions. However, P1, diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, can comprehend the research questions well. Moreover, participants' background examines how the background of PWDs can influence their career determinants, particularly race and family income level. P1, a Bumiputera Sarawak individual, shared, "I resided with my grandmother, who motivated me to enrol in this vocational centre to refine my skills. My parents lived in another city, but they make efforts to call and visit me whenever they can." On the other hand, P2, who is Malay, stated, "This is my second time join(ing) here, having started at 18 but was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. My parents are incredibly supportive and are keen on me acquiring skills." This finding, supported by Lewis et al. (2017), suggests that a strong ethnic identity has positively influenced career exploration among students. This narrative study suggests that Malay individuals might be more involved in addressing children's disabilities. However, more research is needed to confirm this idea. This study could not distinguish significant differences regarding family income level, as both participants hail from B40 families. Nonetheless, the study highlights the importance of family support, with P2 exhibiting higher confidence than P1. The research observations indicate that P2 is more outgoing and energetic. This finding, like Harun et al. (2019), indicates that individuals with learning disabilities are more likely to be employed if their parents are directly involved in their education. This finding suggests that parents must take on multiple roles to ensure the active participation and dynamic outcomes of PWDs.

Table 2 presents the perceptions of career counselling among the study's participants, P1 and P2. Both participants do not acknowledge the accessibility of career counselling services. This may suggest a potential barrier to accessing support and guidance for career-related matters. P1 remarked, "...I wasn't aware of career counselling services; I've never heard of them. I never imagined such service existed, as here, teachers primarily assist us in finding job opportunities." Meanwhile, P2 commented, "...the teachers here are incredibly supportive. They encourage our independence and promote public speaking skills, so I've never heard about career counselling

services.” Based on the findings, it is evident from the participants' responses that there is a lack of awareness about career counselling services among PWDs. To address this, it is essential to implement awareness, or informational sessions specifically targeted at PWDs, highlighting the availability and benefits of career counselling services. Talapatra et al. (2018) revealed that the effectiveness of transition services for PWDs in school is heightened when instructors recognise and cultivate the strengths of PWDs. This aligns with this study's findings, as PWDs mentioned their teacher's role as career advisors. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to be informed about the benefits of career counselling and to expose PWDs to these services.

Table 2. Career counselling perceptions.

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Category	P1	P2
Career counselling service accessibility	Accessible	Not available	√	√
Career counsellor/ job coach roles	Visibility	Not sure	√	√
Career counselling service values	Effective	Not aware	√	√
Suggestions for improvement	Impactful	Career development Confidence	√	√

P1 and P2 also express unawareness of available career counselling and job coach services. This unawareness could not lead to a greater utilisation of career counselling services. P1 stated, “We aren't exposed to job coaches, but we attend the career fair once a year. Typically, our teacher informs us about the career opportunities.” Meanwhile, P2 mentioned, “...I'm not very familiar with career-related activities, but my teacher recommends that we consider starting our own business. This finding related to Abd Manaf et al. (2018), revealed that the knowledge of PWDs regarding job coaches is moderate. Through personal communication, the absence of job coaches since 2021 prompts this research to compare the roles of job coach and career counsellor. Since participants mentioned that teachers primarily assist them in finding job opportunities, integrating career counselling sessions into educational programs can enhance accessibility. This integration ensures that PWDs receive comprehensive career exploration and decision-making support alongside their academic curriculum. As indicated by Sartinah (2020) in Eseadi (2023), counselling processes associated with career choice and preparation are encompassed within the domain of career counselling. Therefore, this study suggests fostering collaboration between career counsellors and teachers. Both also acknowledge the value of career counselling. It suggests that both PWDs recognise the potential impact of career counselling on their professional growth and decision-making processes. This suggests that PWDs believe in positive outcomes due to their engagement with career counselling. P1 stated, “...although I have not joined career counselling services, I do believe that these services will help us to build our confidence in terms of our disabilities and to talk about our challenges. Meanwhile, P2 added, “...as you explained, I can see that career counselling might help us to be more self-reliant”. This concludes that both participants

underscore the multi-faceted benefits of career counselling in empowering PWDs to navigate their professional journeys with confidence and autonomy. As Brown and Brooks (2002) outlined, career counselling is viewed as a structured process to foster self-discovery and understanding of the professional landscape. This process empowers individuals to make well-informed decisions concerning their employment, education, and overall life path. This study suggests recognising the diverse needs of PWDs and ensuring that career counselling services are tailored to accommodate their specific disabilities. This may involve providing accessible materials, accommodating physical or cognitive limitations, and offering personalised support during counselling sessions.

Both participants also offer suggestions for improving career counselling for their disabilities. This indicates a willingness to provide feedback and contribute to enhancing these resources. P1 expressed interest in experiencing career counselling firsthand and providing valuable feedback, stating, ... "I would love to engage with career counselling services and offer feedback. I believe it will help me become more comfortable discussing my challenges and finding a career path that suits me." P2 also showed interest in the concept of career counselling, mentioning, "...I'm intrigued by the idea of career counselling and would be willing to participate if invited." Aga Mohd Jaladin et al. (2023) stated that group counselling can help the physical PWDs to boost their self-esteem. Therefore, establishing a feedback mechanism where PWDs can provide input on the accessibility and effectiveness of career counselling services might help. This could include regular surveys, focus group discussions, or individual feedback sessions to gather insights and suggestions for improvement from PWDs directly. Additionally, conducting a case study with PWDs in vocational centres could provide more insights into improving these services.

4 CONCLUSION

Exploring the career counselling services among PWDs is paramount, particularly within vocational training settings. This study underscores the need to understand the significance of career counselling services in vocational centres. This study also aims to address practical gaps associated with government initiatives. Moreover, it is essential for the evidence to articulate the necessity of this research, especially given the absence of vocational secondary schools for PWDs in Sarawak. To establish inclusive practices for PWDs in Sarawak, this research study seeks to contribute insights from the perspectives of PWDs in what career counselling can offer. By understanding the PWDs' needs and challenges, career counsellors can empower PWDs by providing them with the necessary tools, guidance, and encouragement to pursue their career goals confidently in vocational settings. This understanding helps tailor interventions and guidance to address the unique circumstances, needs, challenges, and aspirations of PWDs more effectively. Research outcomes can guide the development of specialised resources, materials, and programs tailored to the needs of PWDs, enhancing the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the services provided by career counsellors. This study can assist PWDs in understanding the roles of career counselling services. If PWDs struggle with self-concept, enhancing their self-concept can become their primary focus. Actions that can be taken include attending various programs to boost their self-concept. It is important to note that self-concept functions as a system of cognitive structure for interpreting and responding to the environment. This serves as a way for them to prepare for the workforce and become self-reliant in seeking their own income. The challenges faced by PWDs in vocational centres benefit the government and private sectors by guiding policymaking, resource

allocation and fostering collaboration to create environments that support individual career growth, workforce productivity, and overall economic and social development. Understanding the critical career development factors and their perceptions helps anticipate future workforce needs, enabling both sectors to align their recruitment, training, and development strategies with the evolving demands of the job market among PWDs. Collaboration between the government and private sectors is essential for creating effective career development programs for PWDs. Research findings can facilitate collaboration by providing a collective understanding of the challenges and opportunities in PWDs' career development.

Moreover, by understanding the specific career development factors affecting PWDs within communities empowers them by acknowledging their unique needs and challenges. It promotes inclusivity by providing tailored support for their career aspirations. These research findings can raise awareness within communities about the barriers and opportunities faced by PWDs in pursuing careers. This awareness can drive advocacy efforts for equal opportunities and more accessible career pathways for individuals with disabilities. It also helps in debunking stereotypes and biases about the capabilities of PWDs. It promotes a more inclusive mindset within communities and workplaces, reducing stigma and discrimination. On the other hand, this study also can facilitate the creation of support networks and collaborations within communities to provide guidance, resources, and encouragement for PWDs pursuing their career goals. The study's findings may have limited generalizability due to the focus on a specific region (Sarawak) and the potential uniqueness of its vocational centre landscape. Future research could aim for broader geographical coverage to enhance the generalisability of findings. Furthermore, complementing quantitative analyses with qualitative investigations could offer richer insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of PWDs regarding vocational centres and career counselling services.

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