

Factors Predicting the Acquisition of Soft Skills Among Students with Learning Disabilities in Vocational Special Education Secondary School

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Abstract— Acquiring soft skills is essential for all students, including those with disabilities, as these skills contribute to personal and professional success. Soft skills are non-technical abilities that enable individuals to work well with others, communicate effectively, and adapt to various situations. Students with disabilities may face unique challenges in developing their soft skills. This research determined the factors affecting the acquisition of soft skills among students with learning disabilities in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools. Survey research design is a methodological approach used in this study to collect data from samples by administering a questionnaire. This study focuses on soft skills, which consist of seven elements (communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, information management and lifelong learning skills, entrepreneurship skills, moral and ethics skills and leadership skills), self-esteem and self-efficacy as variables. Two secondary schools are involved in this study: Vocational Special Education Secondary School Shah Alam, Selangor and Vocational Special Education Secondary School Indahpura, Johor, with a total sample of 52 students. Data analysis revealed that the combination of variables to predict the acquisition of soft skills from self-esteem and self-efficacy was statistically significant. In conclusion, self-esteem and self-efficacy influence the acquisition of soft skills among students with learning disabilities in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools.

Keywords— *Soft skills, self-esteem, self-efficacy, special education*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysia Ministry of Education has provided special education services for students with special needs and special rehabilitation for vision, hearing, and learning problems. The special needs category is divided into six main categories: visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, physical impairment, learning disabilities and multiple impairments. The types of students with learning disabilities include Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, dyscalculia, Hearing Processing Disorder, Language Processing Disturbance, Non-Slim Learning Disability, and Visual Perspective or Visual Motor Deficiency.

The school for special education was established as a preschool, ordinary day school of primary and secondary, and technical and vocational secondary schools. The duration of education for primary schools is six years, while for secondary schools, it is five years and extended up to a maximum of two years

according to the student's needs. The total number of special education schools throughout Malaysia is 34. The Vocational Special Education Secondary School (SMPKV) offers many skill courses. Among them are women's clothes-making, batik-making operations, reflexology, etc. These skills will be taught by their teachers gradually. Besides mastering the skills course, students must also master the soft skills. Soft skills are divided into skill, behaviour, and personal qualities. It will help someone interact with the surrounding environment well and the goals they want [10].

Acquiring soft skills is crucial to today's life and also in any career. Soft skills can help a person complete themselves in more courses and meet the employer's needs. Some studies have identified the needs of employers in terms of skills more generally, and there is evidence that graduates with soft skills are usually considered able to work [12]. According to [11], students who lack cognitive, and interpersonal skills are more aggressive, socially isolated and careless about things with the community around them. This condition causes students to show aggressive behaviour and negative self-adjustment. Students with learning difficulties usually have low self-confidence and abstract thinking skills that cause low confidence [8]. Students who have learning difficulties have weak social skills, are less proud of their appearance and have too much aggressive frustration and extreme anxiety.

Besides, students with learning difficulties also have language, communication, and emotional limitations [1]. The inability to express ideas through language is another important feature of students with learning difficulties. They do not know how to articulate a sentence while communicating [18]. Their level of association and ways of communicating are considered weak because they feel that the community around them will not underestimate their presence. This was demonstrated by observations of students with learning difficulties who found that they felt not humiliated by the teacher, students with a learning problem did not understand the material taught by the teachers, they tended to remain silent and to look lightly at the content of the lesson during the learning session [17]. If left to continue, it would jeopardise their future development. [7] say that social stigma also plays a role in the level of self-efficacy and self-esteem of students. Society sees these learning difficulties or disabilities students as mind-stricken children because of their low abilities. This stigma or view makes students with learning difficulties feel too disappointed and start blaming themselves. Studies show that students with learning difficulties are often treated as less skilled and slow in their academic or occupational achievement [15]. This negative impact makes them isolate themselves from society and not apply any soft skills such as communication between them and the community around them. A study from [1] focused on the soft skills, self-esteem

and self-efficacy of the learning disabilities students, but only one vocational college was involved.

Thus, this study was conducted to identify the factors that predict the soft skills of students with special needs at the Vocational Special Education High School (SMPKV). This study involved students with learning disabilities in the Preparation and Production of Food Course at SMPKV Shah Alam, Selangor and the SMPKV Indahpura, Johor.

II. METHODOLOGY

This methodology section describes the research design, population, sampling and instrument. This research aims to study the factors predicting the acquisition of soft skills among students with learning disabilities in Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools.

A. Research Design

The survey method is used in this study because it is suitable for providing examples or figures that quickly relate to the population's current behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs. This study uses a quantitative approach aimed at identifying self-esteem, self-effectiveness, and soft skills, and then it will study the factors predicting the acquisition of soft skills among students with learning disabilities.

B. Population and Sampling

The population of this research are students with learning disabilities in Food Preparation and Production courses at Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools such as SMPKV Shah Alam, Selangor, SMPKV Indahpura, Johor and SMPKV Kuantan, Pahang. Table I shows the research population from two locations.

TABLE I. THE RESEARCH POPULATION

Location	Number of students
SMPKV Indahpura	50
SMPKV Shah Alam	15
Total	65

Based on the Sampling table by Kirjie Morgan [13], the total student sample was 56. The sampling method used was proportionate sampling.

C. Research Instrument

The instrument of this research was adapted from three different instruments. The self-esteem instrument was adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Evaluation Level Scale (1965) [20], the self-efficacy instrument referred to the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) by [21], and the soft skills instrument was from [22]. The research instrument has been through a validation process carried out by three experts involved in the study. The results of the reliability test of 30 students with learning disabilities at SMPKV Kuantan can be seen in Table II. The Cronbach's Alpha score on each survey section indicates a high and acceptable credibility of over 0.6. This achievement proves that the set of items is reliable and acceptable.

TABLE II. CRONBACH'S ALPHA VALUE FOR EACH SECTION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Section	Cronbach's Alpha
Self-esteem	0.81
Self-efficacy	0.70
Soft skills	0.96

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study managed to get feedback from only 52 respondents out of 56 students. The demographic result shows the majority of the respondents are male students. The respondents were mostly between 16 and 17 years old.

A. The Level Of Self-Esteem Of Students With Learning Disabilities.

This section consists of ten survey items. These items were analyzed using descriptive statistics to obtain mean values and the standard deviation. This result indicates that the level of self-esteem of the students with learning disabilities was moderate. The results for all items are shown in Table III. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of a survey conducted by [2], which showed that students with learning difficulties were classified in simple stages based on their self-esteem and academic achievement levels. The level of self-appreciation of students with learning difficulties towards the formation of soft skills is superficial because of the characteristics of students with learning problems who have difficulty socializing with the people around them. According to [19], students with learning difficulties don't dare to show up, and expressing their opinions is not easy. Social self-esteem function limitations and self-confidence lead students to learning difficulties at a simple stage.

TABLE III. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SELF-ESTEEM OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Self-esteem items	M	SD	Interpretation
1. Overall, I'm satisfied with myself	3.13	0.77	High
2. Sometimes I don't think I'm really good.	2.92	0.71	Moderate
3. I feel that I have some excellent qualities.	2.85	0.87	Moderate
4. I can do something like most people do.	2.48	0.92	Moderate
5. I don't think I have much to be proud of.	2.37	1.07	Moderate
6. I sometimes feel like I'm useless	3.10	0.72	High
7. I feel that I am a person of value, at least being on the same level as others	3.46	0.73	High
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	2.35	1.08	Moderate
9. I tend to feel that I'm the one who fails.	3.27	0.82	High
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself	2.63	0.97	Moderate
Overall	2.86	0.41	Moderate

B. The Level Of Self-Efficacy Of Students With Learning Disabilities

This section consists of nine survey items. The overall mean value was $M=2.98$, $SD=0.46$. This result indicates that the level of self-efficacy of students with learning disabilities was moderate. The results for all items are shown in Table IV. Most students are less

confident in completing tasks within the prescribed timeframe. The level of self-effectiveness of students is difficult to learn towards the formation of soft skills at the simple stage because, according to [17], the inability to judge themselves is usually faced by the group that cannot perform some tasks like other normal people. Their functional limitation leads to some limited skills. The highest study item results show students feel they can stick to the goal and their goal. Every human being will have a goal that they want to aim for. Students with learning difficulties also have aspirations that they wish to. According to this finding, they are also like normal human beings who want to their aspirations and goals. The results of this study, along with the [9] study, found positive results that someone who has dreams and goals will significant achievements and have a high level of self-esteem. [6] say that self-effectiveness has a significant impact on a person's cognitive process. The more one believes in himself, the more goals he has and will be more comfortable for those to be achieved while those with low self-effectiveness focus on the negative side, and most likely they will experience difficulties and failures in achieving their goals [4].

TABLE IV. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SELF-EFFICACY OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Self-efficacy items	M	SD	Interpretation
1. I can always solve complex problems if I work hard	3.19	0.63	High
2. If someone forbids me to do something, I can find a way to get what I want	2.85	0.92	Moderate
3. It's easy for me to stick to my goals and my goals	3.29	0.67	High
4. I'm sure I can handle unexpected events efficiently.	2.75	0.68	Moderate
5. With my intelligence, I know how to deal with unexpected situations.	2.65	0.97	Moderate
6. I can solve most problems if I make the necessary effort	2.98	0.87	Moderate
7. I can be calm when faced with difficulties because I can rely on the ability to cope with problems.	2.96	0.86	Moderate
8. When I face a problem, I can usually find some solutions	3.04	0.86	High
9. If I'm in trouble, I can usually find a solution.	3.10	0.63	High
Overall	2.98	0.46	Moderate

C. The Level Of Soft Skills Of Students With Learning Disabilities

Overall, the level of soft skills acquisition of students with learning disabilities is high with $M=3.00$, and $SD=0.44$. The results for all constructs are shown in Table V. The study's findings showed four simple elements, namely the level of mastery of communication skills, level of mastering of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, stage of masking of skills of continuous learning skills and information management and entrepreneurial skills of students with learning difficulties. Students with learning difficulties are not good at shaping sentences in communicating and, at the same time, feel they lack the ability to do so [18]. Their level of association and ways of communicating are considered weak because they feel that the community around them will not underestimate their presence. According to [3], students with learning difficulties experience obstruction or delay in thinking, responding to stimuli, and social

adjustment. However, they are still much better than those with a tight mind, slower than normal, and proven attitudes toward teachers and colleagues often underestimate students with learning disabilities [24].

TABLE V. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SOFT-SKILLS CONSTRUCT OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Soft skills construct	M	SD	Interpretation
1. Communication skills	2.98	0.53	Moderate
2. Critical thinking and problem-solving	2.80	0.54	Moderate
3. Teamwork skills	3.15	0.57	High
4. Life-long learning and information management skills	2.91	0.48	Moderate
5. Entrepreneurial skills	2.99	0.54	Moderate
6. Professional ethics and moral skills	3.12	0.62	High
7. Leadership skills	3.08	0.51	High
Overall	3.00	0.44	High

D. Factors Predicting The Acquisition Of Soft Skills Among Students With Learning Disabilities

Simultaneous multiple regression was conducted to investigate the best predictors of the acquisition of soft skills among students with learning disabilities. The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations can be found in Table VI.

TABLE VI. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATION AND INTERCORRELATIONS FOR ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS AND PREDICTORS VARIABLES (N=52)

Variable	M	SD	Self-esteem	Self-efficacy
Acquisition of soft skills	3.00	.44	.49**	.69**
Predictor variable				
Self-esteem	2.86	.41	--	.27**
Self-efficacy	2.98	.46	.27**	--

The combination of variables to predict the acquisition of soft skills, self-esteem, and self-efficacy was statistically significant, $F(2, 49)=32.43$, $p<.001$. The beta coefficients are presented in Table VII. Both variables, self-esteem and self-efficacy, significantly predict the acquisition of soft skills. This indicates that the model explained 55.2% of the variance in the acquisition of soft skills. According to Cohen, this is a large effect. Self-esteem and Self-efficacy affect the mastery of soft skills of students with learning disabilities. According to [14], students with high communication skills have a higher level of personal, social, and general self-adaptation. This means that students with good communication skills know how to adapt to the environment and the people around them. They are also commonly known as individuals with good personalities. [6] stated the need to develop self-efficacy through the student's own experience. Students with experience in various skills such as communication, creativity and other skills will have high self-efficacy. They will reach the level of career skills required by the employer. In a study by [23] he revealed that a person's ability in public speech depends on the level of self-efficacy.

TABLE VII. SIMULTANEOUS MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS SUMMARY FOR SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-EFFICACY PREDICTING THE ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS

Variable	B	SEB	β
Self-esteem	.351	.106	.324**
Self-efficacy	.582	.095	.599**
Note: $R^2 = .552$; $F(2,49) = 32.43$, $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$			

IV. CONCLUSION

Students with learning disabilities can master important skills such as teamwork, professional ethics, and moral and leadership skills. With these skills, students can develop their abilities. This is positive, and students are more likely to be accepted to work. Besides, the student's self-esteem level is simple: the self-esteem of each individual will increase with age. The older a person grows, the more mature the individual is in thinking and several other things. The student's level of self-effectiveness is high, which shows that they believe in their ability to do something. Based on the study's findings, it can be suggested that the school may undertake activities that can improve the soft skills, self-esteem and self-efficacy of students with learning disabilities. Teachers must be more creative in applying soft skills such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving in their teaching sessions. Future studies can be extended to include students with physical problems or use a qualitative approach to learn more about the acquisition of soft skills by students of this special education category.

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