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EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AND QUALITY OF LIFE AMONG EMPLOYEES WITH MILD AND MODERATE INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY WHO ATTEND OCCUPATION CENTRES IN CATALONIA (SPAIN)

Competencias de empleabilidad y calidad de vida en usuarios con discapacidad intelectual leve y moderada de centros ocupacionales de Cataluña (España)

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Abstract: *Background*: The study explores the relationship between quality of life (QoL) and employability skills in a non-random sample of 100 employees of occupational centres (OCs) in Barcelona (Spain). The influence of gender, age and level of intellectual disability (ID) is also explored. *Method*: A quantitative approach was adopted to collect and examine data, gathered through two different instruments: the GENCAT SCALE (Verdugo *et al.*, 2008) (and the Employability Skills Scale (Jariot, Laborda and González, 2020). *Results*: A correlation between QoL and employability skills has been found. A relationship between age and employability skills was also found, in which younger individuals reported better in employability skills. Age was also found to have

an effect on some QoL domains. The ID level turned out to be a significant factor in the development of employability skills, as well as in some QoL domains. The crucial role of job placement in personal development is underlined, as well as the need for more inclusive procedures in occupancy services.

Keywords: quality of life; employability skills; intellectual disabilities; occupational centres.

Resumen: *Introducción*: el estudio explora la relación entre calidad de vida y competencias de empleabilidad en una muestra no aleatoria de 100 empleados de centros ocupacionales en Barcelona (España). También se explora la influencia del género, la edad y el nivel de discapacidad intelectual en ambas variables. *Método*: se adoptó un enfoque cuantitativo para recopilar y examinar datos, reunidos a través de dos instrumentos diferentes: la Escala GENCAT (Verdugo *et al*., 2008) y la Escala de Competencias de Empleabilidad (Jariot, Laborda y González, 2020). *Resultados*: existe una correlación entre la calidad de vida y las competencias de empleabilidad. También se encontró relación entre la edad y dichas competencias, en la cual las personas más jóvenes obtuvieron puntuaciones más altas. También se descubrió que la edad influye en algunos dominios de calidad de vida. El grado de discapacidad resultó ser un factor significativo en el desarrollo de competencias de empleabilidad, así como en algunos dominios de calidad de vida. Se subraya el papel crucial de la inserción laboral en el desarrollo personal, así como la necesidad de procedimientos más inclusivos en los servicios de ocupación.

Palabras clave: calidad de vida; competencias de empleabilidad; discapacidad intelectual; centro ocupacional.

1. Introduction

The concept of intellectual disability (ID) has been subjected to continual changes in response to the socio-political variations in our society. We have moved from a medical perspective, in which the differences between people were considered to be the cause of the problem, to a human perspective, in which the person is considered as a whole.

According to the AAIDD, disability is conceived of as a multi-sensorial fact that has a holistic effect on the person's life (AAIDD, 2011). This view places the difficulties in the interaction between the person and their context, implying that these alterations will affect the whole life of the person — which includes five dimensions: intellectual abilities, adaptive behaviour, participation, interaction and social values, health and context.

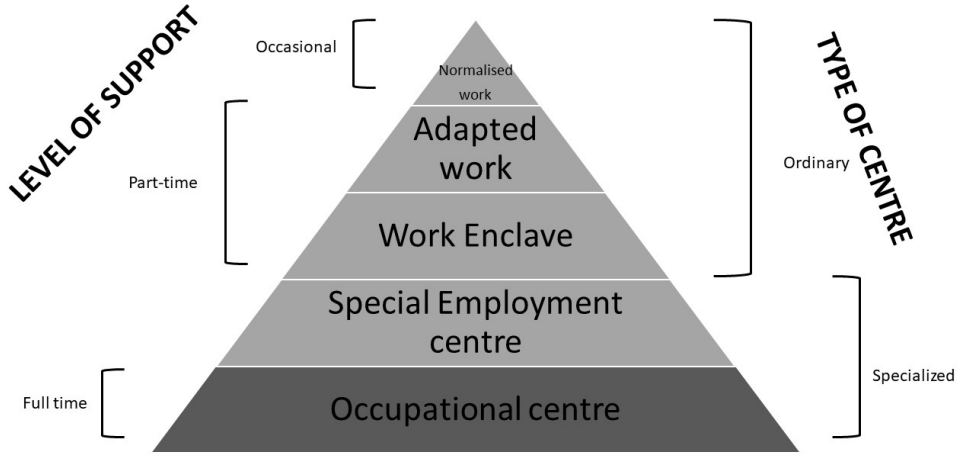
As well as in the theoretical bases, there have been changes in the practical scenario too, specifically in the educational and work fields. In Spain, for instance, several legislative changes (LISMI, 1982, Law 56/2003 and Royal Legislative Decree 3/2012 or Law 3/2015) have been applied following the path stated in the sixth article of the Sundberg Declaration, which affirmed that "Education, training, culture and information

programs must be aimed at integrating disabled persons into the ordinary working and living environment […]. In order to bring this about, disabled persons must receive appropriate education and training, whatever their personal situation (in institutions, at home, in schools, etc.), for as long as necessary" (UNESCO, 1981, p. 2). This declaration generated the closure of some institutions for people with disabilities, and their inclusion in community and employment centres; this process was known as deinstitutionalization.

With the aim of achieving this deinstitutionalization, the regional social services from Catalonia (Spain) designed an itinerary with two employment options: sheltered employment in specialised centres and mainstream employment in ordinary companies.

Nowadays, employment options for people with intellectual disabilities in Catalonia are classified by the authors (2017) according to the type of labour placement, the grade of support needed, and the main purpose of the activity.

FIGURE 1. Classification of employment options in Catalonia



Laborda & González (2017). Employment options for people with intellectual disabilites in Catalonia.

As shown in Figure 1, the least inclusive option is the occupational centre (OC), in which the person receives the maximum support from educators in order to increase their personal development. Inside the occupational centres there are two different services: the occupational service therapy (OST) or the occupational placement service (OPS). The aim of OST is to develop basic skills related to the job placement. Specific training is focused on improving interpersonal relationships. This service is

meant for people with an intellectual disability of at least 65 %. Conversely, at the OPS, pre-labour activities are developed in order to prepare the person for a more inclusive job placement.

Moving on to more inclusive options, the special employment centre (SEC) has a productive aim that, at the same time, offers less support to workers. The next step is the work enclave (WE), in which the person is placed in an ordinary company but gets some supervision from the SEC educators. In terms of the mainstream options, normalised work (NW) offers support only occasionally, whilst in a supported employment (SE) this is constant.

As demonstrated, these options match the thesis by Olsen (2009) (quoted in Lövgren and Hamreby, 2011) that identifies the ambiguous relationship to work that people with intellectual disabilities often have because of the difficulty of finding a balance between their desire to work and their care needs in certain settings.

As several studies have outlined (Robertson, Hatton, Beyer, Emerson and Baines, 2019; Ellenkamp, Brouwers, Embregts, Joosen and van Weeghel, 2016; Lindstrom, Doren and Miesch, 2011; (Nota, Ginevra and Carrieri, 2010) (ID) having a job is crucial to the personal development of an adult with ID. As finding a workplace is seen as an important milestone in itself, it tends to be the first step towards the beginning of an independent life — as well as a symbol of citizenship and community participation.

Employment and personal development are directly related. Being employed contributes to a person's development in several ways: creating a daily routine, giving economic autonomy, involving the person in new unfamiliar contexts, and also predisposing the individual to some circumstances that contribute to their personal growth (Jahoda, Kemp, Riddell *et al.*, 2008). Employment also helps the development of social skills (Fillary and Pernice, 2005) –due to the fact that the person is placed in a work context and can interact and establish new relationships– and cognitive abilities, since the person is exposed to competitive situations (Stephens, Collins and Dooder, 2005). At the same time, it has been shown that development of the person's skills contributes to their successful work placement (Holmes and Fillary, 2000).

Gilson, Carter and Biggs (2017), stated that one of the key aspects for the successful employment of people with intellectual disabilities is employability skills development. Defined by Blas (2007), employability skills are those related to the applying of knowledge to professional activities, in order to achieve expected results and accomplish production and workplace standards. As Blanco (2008) shows, employability skills: (1) integrate knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values, (2) are only defined in the action, (3) are related to the context and (4) allow the person to give answers to problematic situations, helping the resolution of new or already known ones.

But as well as impacting on employment success, employability skills also have an effect on other personal aspects, such as Quality of Life (QoL). Quality of life is defined by Schalock, Keith, Verdugo and Gómez (2010) as a multidimensional phenomenon composed of eight domains that are influenced by personal and environmental characteristics, which are divided into three factors: independence (personal development, self-determination and interpersonal relationships), social participation (social

inclusion and rights) and well-being (emotional well-being, physical well-being and material well-being). These factors are the same for all people, although they may vary in value and importance according to each individual.

In this study, the quality of life and employment skills development of users of some OC in Barcelona will be evaluated. As it was part of a deeper study in which the employment situation in the different settlements where explored, the decision of the authors was to start the analysis in the most restrictive option, the OC. It is important to note that, in Spain, governmental responsibilities relating to education, social services and the professional inclusion of people with special educational needs (SEN) are transferred to autonomous regions, so the case of Catalonia will be different from other areas of the country. Our hypothesis are that (1) there are some variables (age, gender, ID level) that influence QoL and employability skills development and (2) QoL and employability skills development are interrelated.

2. Methodology

2.1. *Sample and recruitment*

The statistics services database (IDESCAT) of the Generalitat de Catalunya was used to identify occupational centres for adults with intellectual disability. The search was focused on Barcelona, where there are 178 occupational therapy institutions. Of those, 161 centres were private (90.4 %) and 17 were public. Because of the difficulties of proceeding with an effective, random sampling that was representative, we decided to apply a non-probability sampling. We contacted 30 centres (close to 15 %) via email to inform them of the research and ask for their participation. Of those contacted, 16 centres (68 %) agreed to participate: 14 (88 %) were private and two (12 %) were public.

Regarding the individuals to be assessed, inclusion criteria were: (1) to be over 18 years old; (2) to have a diagnosed level of mild or moderate ID; and (3) to have been attending the centre for at least one year. To justify the second inclusion criteria, it is important to note that when focusing the study on the OCs, we expected to find people with severe or profound degrees of ID. The fact that the sample was totally composed of individuals with mild and moderate ID conflicts with the preconception that lower levels of ID were linked to more inclusive professional scenarios. Individuals with higher levels of ID were not employed in the OCs, despite it is the service designed to employ individuals with a deep need of support. Regarding supervisors, who were the ones who answered the questionnaires, requirements were to have been working at the centre for at least one year and to have been working directly with the assessed person for at least six months. Each supervisor was asked to complete two questionnaires about five different people. Two options were offered, either to self-complete the questionnaires or to complete it during face-to-face interviews. Most supervisors chose the former.

The final sample was composed of 100 people with intellectual disabilities (48 % men and 52 % women), aged between 20 and 60 years old, from 16 different OCs. Within the sample, 39 % had mild ID, while the other 61 % had moderate ID. It was also composed of 16 supervisors from what no demographical data were collected, as it was not relevant for our study.

2.2. *Instruments*

Two instruments, written in Catalan, were used in the study: the GENCAT scale (Verdugo, Arias, Gómez and Schalock, 2008) and the employability skills scale (Jariot, Laborda and González, 2020). Other information was gathered, such as gender, age and the degree of disability of each user, in order to analyse their relationship to the results.

2.2.1. QoL scale

The GENCAT QoL scale (Verdugo *et al.*, 2007, 2008) was designed to collect objective and observable data about the QoL of people with disabilities, based on the direct observation of a person's life. It is composed of eight scales, which correspond to the eight QoL domains of Schalock and Verdugo's multidimensional model — and 69 items. The answer format is a frequency scale with four options ('never or hardly ever', 'sometimes', 'often' and 'always or almost always'). The scale provides a score for each dimension, as well as a QoL global rate. It is designed to be answered by one user's supervisor in 10 minutes.

The GENCAT scale was selected due to the flexibility that the instrument offers, according to the purpose, content or respondent of the scale. Moreover, the scale offers the possibility to assess either the person's perceived well-being (self-report) or the person's life experiences (by an external observer). In this case, it was answered by the job supervisor who was in direct contact with the individual.

The GENCAT scale shows a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$) and a low standard error of measurement (SEM = 6.92) (Verdugo *et al*., 2008).

2.3. *Employability skills scale*

For this dimension, a structured questionnaire was developed for the purpose, based on Docampo and Morán (2014), who investigated the factors that influence the achievement and maintenance of a workplace, and Lucas, Arias and Ovejero (2005), who explore employability skills development through know-how and know how to be.

After composing a detailed list of 25 general skills, they were grouped into four categories: learning and cognitive skills; functional skills; social and attitudinal skills;

and communicative skills. Internal consistency of the scale was tested through Cronbach's alpha, which reported an index of .913. It was also explored for each subscale, giving the results shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Indexes for Each Subscale of the Employability Skills Scale

Dimensions	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Total scale	25	.913
Learning and cognitive	4	.795
Functional	6	.718
Social and attitudinal	11	.855
Communicative	4	.729

As in the QoL scale, each item was to be valued by the job trainer on a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 was almost always, 3 often, 2 sometimes and 1 never or hardly ever.

This scale was also designed to be answered by a direct supervisor and took about five minutes to complete.

2.4. *Procedure*

2.4.1. Data collection

The OC procedure started with an initial email contact that gave a brief study explanation. After their acceptance to participate, a meeting was scheduled to present the aim of the research and to explain the methodology. A second meeting was then planned for data collection. Job trainers or supervisors were asked to fill in the QoL scale and the employability skills scale for each of the users they were in charge of (usually six — except in four cases, where they were in charge of seven).

One last meeting, once the data analysis was done, was offered to the centres in order to explain and discuss the results of the research.

2.4.2. Data analysis

Data management and analysis were performed using quantitative software. Descriptive analysis was performed (means and standard deviation), as well as a frequency distribution representation. Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was used to analyse the correlation between QoL and employability skills development, QoL and age, age and employability skills level, and QoL and employability skills deve-

lopment through the ID level, as well as the different scores of the employment skill subscales. A two-sample T-test was employed to contrast the development of the employability skills and QoL between people with moderate and mild ID, and between men and women. This test was also used to contrast the general employability skills development and the score of each subscale from the employability skills scale between the two gender groups and the four ID level groups.

3. Results

Looking at the identifying variables, gender was not found to be statistically significant in either QoL or employability skills development.

Age did not influence the QoL general level either, but it did negatively influence the interpersonal relationship index ($r = -.236$; $p > .05$) and the personal development index

($r = -.199$; $p > .05$): the younger the age, the higher the personal and interpersonal development. In employability skills, age was found to have a negative but weak significant correlation ($r = -.207$; $p > .05$), so the younger the age, the higher the skills development. It was also found to have a correlation with the development of cognitive and learning skills ($r = -.240$; $p > .05$) and communicative skills ($r = -.270$; $p > .05$).

Taking ID degree as a factor, statistically significant differences were not found at the global QoL index, but some subscales showed differences between mild and moderate users: people with a mild ID had a higher level of self-determination ($t = 2.713$; $p > .05$; $\overline{X}$ mild = 23.21; $\overline{X}$ moderate = 20.67) and of rights ($t = 2.162$; $p > .05$; $\overline{X}$ mild = 34.95; $\overline{X}$ moderate = 33.48).

However, skills development revealed statistically significant differences in the main index: individuals with a mild ID had a higher level of skills than those with moderate ID ($t = 2.453$; $p > .05$; $\overline{X}$ mild = 76.21; $\overline{X}$ moderate = 70.60). Exploring the subscales, it was found that the cognitive, learning and communicative skills subscales were significantly influenced. People with mild ID have more communicative skills ($t = 2.707$; $p > .05$; $\overline{X}$ mild = 11.74; SD = 2.73; $\overline{X}$ moderate = 10.34; SD = 2.38), as well as cognitive and learning skills ($t = 2.164$; $p > .05$; $\overline{X}$ mild = 11.85; SD = 2.146; $\overline{X}$ moderate = 10.90; SD = 2.11). Although there was no significant relationship, people with mild ID tended to have higher scores than people with moderate intellectual disabilities in social, attitudinal and functional skills (see Table 2). To summarise, ID degree did influence skills development.

Table 2. Median Scores of Skills According to the Degree of Intellectual Disability

Competency	User's disability	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social and attitudinal	low	33.4359	5.34492
	moderate	31.4262	5.18800
Functional	low	16.5897	3.04110
	moderate	15.6066	2.76453

Finally, the two domains (QoL and employability skills development) were cross-analysed in order to find intersections. There was a weak correlation ($r = .248$; $p > .05$) between the QoL general score and the global skills level. High scores in QoL corresponded to high scores in skills and vice versa. The group of people with mild ID had a low correlation ($r = .347$; $p > .05$) between QoL and general skills. High scores in wellness corresponded to high scores in general skills and vice versa. This did not happen with people with moderate ID; there was no relationship between QoL and general skills level.

When relating the global QoL index with skills subscales, there was just a moderate relationship between QoL and social-attitudinal skills ($r = .367$; $p > .05$). These results were recurrent with the moderate disability group, since there was a weak relationship between QoL and social-attitudinal skills ($r = .255$; $p > .05$).

4. Discussion

First of all, the hypothesis that QoL and employability skills were related is weakly confirmed. There is a positive relationship between these two dimensions, which means that higher levels of employability skills contribute to a higher level of QoL and vice versa. This agrees with the statements presented by Fillary and Pernice (2005), Stephens, Collins and Dodder (2005), and Holmes and Fillary (2000), which suggest that job placement contributes to individual development and individual development contributes to successful work placement.

In accordance with the findings of previous studies (Sáiz and Santamaría-Vázquez, 2015), no significant differences were found in the QoL or employability skills development level caused by gender. Taking into account that the sample was reduced, but balanced in terms of gender, it could mean that it does not influence the development of these two domains.

Looking for differences caused by age, weak and negative correlations in the development of some subscales were found: interpersonal and personal development in the case of QoL, and cognitive and learning and communicative skills in the case of employability skills. Younger people showed more abilities to interact with others and had a greater knowledge of themselves, and at the same time had better skills to learn and to communicate. These results might seem logical for some parameters

(for example, in the case of cognitive and learning skills-being younger may be a facilitator) but not for interpersonal and personal development, where age is usually considered an enrichment factor. It is important to take into account that old age in this collective starts earlier, so their life cycle follows a different path. Another explanation may be the influence of schooling or apprenticeships on people with intellectual disabilities. As mentioned earlier, our society has experienced a change regarding the scope of ID conceptualization, and it has caused modifications in the educational process and in pre-employment training. This means that, progressively, the Catalan educational system has been moving towards more inclusive school placing, with the objective of promoting real, personal development possibilities. It may then be possible that those young employees who reported better results had participated in more inclusive scenarios (school, home, community) or in apprenticeships or traineeships programs, which were reported to be enhancers of QoL (Cocks, Thoresen and Lee, 2015).

When exploring the degree of ID, in the case of QoL significant differences were only found in two subscales: self-determination and rights. It is interesting to underline that self-determination is also one of the variables that employers evaluate before placing a user into an OST or into an OPS service. It means that it is a crucial skill for employment development (Peralta and Arellano, 2014), and it seems logical to argue that the less intellectual impairment there is, the greater the self-determination. Regarding rights, it makes sense that individuals with a lower ID level will have a higher consciousness of them. Intimacy, consciousness, privacy, and property rights were some of the elements evaluated in the rights sub-scale. So it was predictable to find better results for those employees with a mild ID.

Regarding employability skills development, it was found that the degree of ID causes significant differences-being indirectly related. It means that individuals with a lower ID degree have higher employability skills development than those with a moderate one. It is important to know that ID degree causes differences in skills development. In that respect, further analysis would be needed.

5. Limitations

For the relationship found between age and the development of some QoL aspects, in which youngsters reported better, it might be interesting to consider the new educational paradigm under which young people have been raised. Nowadays, most educational –as well as social– institutions, follow the Sundberg Declaration model, in which the idea is to achieve full inclusion for all. These people have a better development of life success key skills, which tends to have an effect on their QoL. In contrast, middle-aged people have probably been educated following the medical paradigm based on segregation. In the case that this hypothesis turned out to be true, it would be interesting to compare differences in QoL and in employment skills between those employees who attended institutions prior to the paradigm change and those who attended later. Several studies outlined the idea that work placement

directly influences QoL and employability skills scores (Kober *et al*., 2005; Stephens *et al*., 2005), showing higher scores in open employment. In this study, we only explored the dimensions for one type of employment (OC). Further research could be interesting in employment options other than the one already analysed.

Finally, this research used reports from supervisors to describe QoL and employability skills level of each participant. The time that the supervisor had been working with the participant was not registered, but it should be taken into account in future investigations as a key variable that should influence the data collected.

6. Conclusions and implications

Catalan legislation has been experiencing a change towards normalisation and inclusion during the last two decades. Nevertheless, it seems that some of these changes have not reached the employment services policies. It is important to bring to mind that an important number of subjects with mild and moderate ID were found working at the OC, which is a labour setting especially designed for people with deeper degrees of disability, that was unexpected. It could be suggested that guidance services might not be adopting the most inclusive approach, and it might be possible that criteria other than inclusion are taken into account to assign job placement. As West and Wehman identified (2005), the workplace becomes a crucial scenario in which people with intellectual disabilities have the opportunity to interact with others, in order to develop their personal skills. The workplace is also seen as a key aspect in the development of employability skills. The more inclusive the workplace is, the greater opportunities individuals have to develop their employability skills (Williams and Marvin, 2012), and the bigger the impact on their QoL (Cummins, 2016, p. 186) and job satisfaction. This objective must also be applied in social and community settings, so that all aspects of life will be taken into consideration. Professionals should have into account the relationship between employment skills development and quality of life; when exploring possible workplace scenarios for each employee; a deep analysis should be done in order to discover aptitudes and weaknesses so individual support to develop the skills needed to succeed could be offered.

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