

**The employment of intellectual disability graduate students
of Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa: Perspective and experiences**

Wilson D. Mendoza*

Philippine Christian University, Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines

ABSTRACT

This study explored the employment perspectives and lived experiences of five graduate students with intellectual disabilities from Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa, a public special education school in San Pablo, Laguna, Philippines. Employing a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory, the study utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instrument, with participants selected through snowball sampling. Data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework. The five participants, four males and one female aged 28 to 33, held either high school diplomas or vocational training credentials and were engaged in varied employment including paid and self-directed work across caretaking, retail, vending, funeral services, and hotel housekeeping. Three major themes emerged from the analysis. The first theme, cultivating confidence through self-efficacy and support mechanisms, revealed that participants reported moderate to high confidence in their workplace roles, substantially attributed to the active involvement of family and peer networks that served as social capital during the transition to employment. The second theme, bridging school and workforce through skill transfer and application, demonstrated that both soft skills such as communication and collaboration and technical competencies acquired at the school were directly and effectively applied in participants' respective workplaces, affirming the role of specialized education in building cultural capital. The third theme, navigating change through emotional adaptation and future aspirations, showed that participants experienced predominantly positive emotions during their school-to-work transition and articulated clear ambitions for career advancement or entrepreneurial growth, countering stereotypes of passivity among individuals with intellectual disabilities. Collectively, the findings indicate that the primary barriers to employment for this population are systemic and external rather than inherent to their disability. The results underscore the critical importance of coordinated school-family-employer supports, context-sensitive transition programming, and inclusive employment policies. This study contributes localized, practice-oriented evidence to inform program design, employer engagement, and family training initiatives aimed at enhancing employment access, placement, and retention for graduates with intellectual disabilities in the Philippine context.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, employment experiences, school-to-work transition.

*Corresponding author / Email: wilson.mendoza.gse@pcu.edu.ph
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INTRODUCTION

Employment is widely recognized as a fundamental dimension of adult life that extends well beyond its economic function, shaping an individual's identity, sense of purpose, psychological well-being, and capacity for social participation. It provides income essential for meeting basic physiological needs, creates spaces for relationship-building and the development of social belonging (Pascal, 2023), and contributes positively to mental health through the structure and routine it affords (Drake and Wallach, 2020). Employment also serves as a site of professional and personal growth, enabling the continuous development of competencies and self-efficacy (Plyväs et al., 2022). These dimensions, however, are not equally accessible to all members of society. The nature of employment, whether traditional, self-directed, precarious, or absent altogether, significantly mediates its value and the opportunities it enables. Traditional employment is generally associated with stability and social security benefits, while self-employment offers flexibility alongside greater risk and reduced institutional protection. Precarious work, characterized by the absence of legally binding contracts and limited access to benefits, subjects workers to economic insecurity (Bosmans, 2023; Perri et al., 2024; Irvine et al., 2022), and unemployment represents not only financial deprivation but the loss of avenues for personal development and social engagement. These distinctions bear particularly profound consequences for persons with intellectual disabilities, for whom the challenges associated with both accessing and sustaining employment are simultaneously personal, social, cultural, and systemic.

Intellectual disability is a life-changing condition characterized by significant limitations in cognitive and intellectual functioning that affect how individuals navigate the demands of everyday life (Schwartz et al., 2021). It is estimated that 16% of the world's population consists of persons with disabilities (International Labor Organization, 2024), yet persons with intellectual disabilities consistently encounter lower employment rates, diminished job stability, and restricted access to workplace support relative to other disability groups (Heymann et al., 2021; Gutterman, 2023). Their difficulties in the labor market stem from a convergence of factors that reach beyond skill deficits. Limitations in cognitive and adaptive functioning frequently impair the capacity for problem-solving, critical thinking, and the acquisition of new skills (Karhina et al., 2021), while deficits in communication and social skills further complicate the navigation of workplace relationships and expectations (Selander and Wall, 2023). These individual-level challenges are substantially compounded by macroscale barriers, including persistent discrimination in hiring, employer reluctance grounded in the perception that persons with intellectual disabilities represent barriers to productive employment (Naberushkina, 2021; Campos et al., 2020), low societal expectations, historical marginalization, and the systemic absence of inclusive employment policies that would otherwise provide the structural support necessary for meaningful workforce participation (Blixseth, 2023; Engelbrecht et al., 2022; Shevlin et al., 2020).

The traditional employment trajectory for persons with intellectual disabilities has long centered on sheltered employment, a model that occupied a central role in vocational training throughout the twentieth century (Varkas, 2022). Although some researchers have critiqued sheltered employment for its inherently segregating character and the limited opportunities it affords for integration into the broader workforce (Taylor et al., 2021), evidence from Verma and Karuppasamy (2024) complicates this critique by revealing that some individuals, including early adult women with intellectual disabilities, may in fact prefer the structure such arrangements provide. This finding underscores the importance of attending to personal

preferences and self-determination in the design of employment pathways, rather than imposing externally determined models of inclusion. At the same time, more recent scholarship consistently supports the efficacy of supported employment programs that provide individualized job matching, on-the-job training, and long-term retention support. Research conducted in South Africa demonstrated that supported employment grounded in a human rights framework enabled youth with intellectual disabilities to access and sustain meaningful occupational participation (Engelbrecht et al., 2022), while state-level data from Rhode Island confirmed the positive role of supported employment and transition programs in producing integrated employment outcomes (Shogren et al., 2020). These promising interventions, however, are most effective when embedded within corresponding policy and legal frameworks that formalize employment protections and institutional support for persons with intellectual disabilities.

At the international level, several normative frameworks articulate the rights of persons with disabilities to equal and inclusive employment. Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calls for the removal of employment barriers and the provision of reasonable accommodations for workers with disabilities (Büschi et al., 2022). The International Labour Organization reinforces this mandate through Convention No. 159, which encourages member states to develop policies supporting vocational training and inclusive employment opportunities, while the World Health Organization promotes community-based rehabilitation as a mechanism for improving employability by strengthening local support systems and creating inclusive environments (Guterman, 2023). Despite these frameworks, however, the gap between normative aspiration and actual practice remains substantial. Heymann et al. (2021) found that of 193 United Nations member states, only 62% prohibit disability-based employment discrimination, and only 52% commit to providing reasonable workplace accommodations. Laskar (2021) further illustrates this systemic shortfall in the Indian context, where the majority of persons with disabilities remain unemployed and those who are employed are concentrated primarily in agricultural labor, pointing to the broader failure of policy translation across developing nations.

Within the Philippine context, legislative efforts have established a foundational architecture for disability-inclusive employment. Republic Act No. 7277, the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, enshrined the rights of persons with disabilities to equal employment opportunities and mandated the provision of reasonable workplace accommodations. Republic Act No. 10524 strengthened this commitment by requiring both government agencies and private employers to reserve at least 1% of their positions for persons with disabilities, while Republic Act No. 9442 amended the Magna Carta by offering tax incentives and deductions to employers who hire persons with disabilities, thereby creating financial incentives for private sector engagement. The Department of Labor and Employment supports these measures through vocational training initiatives, skills development programs, and collaborative partnerships aimed at facilitating labor market integration. Nevertheless, national statistics indicating that 51.7% of working-age persons with disabilities are employed (DOLE, 2023) mask significant disparities across disability types. Persons with intellectual disabilities are frequently excluded from job opportunities not because of an absence of potential but because of the persistence of systemic, cultural, and attitudinal barriers. Even where special education programs are in place, the Philippine educational system does not consistently ensure that learners with intellectual disabilities are adequately prepared for real-world employment (Karhina et al., 2021; Varkas, 2022), and graduates of these programs regularly encounter high unemployment or underemployment attributable to poor school-to-work transitions.

These converging challenges reveal a critical gap in both policy implementation and scholarly understanding. Existing literature frequently generalizes across disability categories without adequately addressing the specific needs, barriers, and lived experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities, leaving a deficit in disability-specific insight that impedes the development of effective and targeted responses (Selander and Wall, 2023). What remains insufficiently examined is how employment challenges and opportunities unfold at the personal level for this population, how individuals with intellectual disabilities perceive and navigate their own employment journeys, what forms of support or obstruction they encounter, and how existing educational and policy systems genuinely shape their outcomes. This gap in both practice and scholarship underscores the imperative for contextualized, in-depth inquiry grounded in a theoretical framework capable of illuminating the multidimensional nature of employment access.

Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory provides a particularly powerful analytical lens for this purpose. Bourdieu posits that access to opportunities is not determined solely by economic capital in the form of financial resources but by the dynamic interplay of social capital, comprising networks and relationships; cultural capital, comprising skills, education, and knowledge; and economic capital (An, 2023). For persons with intellectual disabilities, limited social capital in the form of weak professional networks, insufficient workplace mentors, and constrained peer support, combined with restricted cultural capital arising from inadequate vocational preparation or limited exposure to workplace norms, significantly diminishes prospects for securing and sustaining meaningful employment, even when jobs are technically available. Conversely, when these forms of capital are deliberately cultivated through family engagement, specialized education, and employer partnerships, employment integration becomes considerably more achievable. The interaction among these capital forms is structural rather than incidental: strong social networks can facilitate access to training opportunities that build cultural capital, which in turn improves economic outcomes, while the absence of social or cultural capital can perpetuate cycles of unemployment and precarious work. Grounding this study in Bourdieu's framework therefore enables a systemic analysis that situates the employment experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities within the broader social, cultural, and economic conditions that shape their opportunities.

The present study addresses these intersecting gaps by exploring the employment perspectives and lived experiences of graduates with intellectual disabilities from Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa, a public special education school in San Pablo, Laguna, Philippines. By examining how social, cultural, and economic capital shape their employment trajectories, the study aims to generate localized, practice-oriented evidence that can inform program design, employer engagement strategies, family training initiatives, and inclusive employment policies. The findings are intended to shift the scholarly and policy conversation from broad, aggregate disability frameworks toward the specific and frequently invisible population of persons with intellectual disabilities in the Philippine public school context, amplifying the voices of individuals who have rarely been centered in either research or decision-making, and providing actionable guidance for those seeking to bridge the persistent gap between education and meaningful employment for this population.

Statement of the problem

This study aims to identify the employment perspectives and experiences of graduate students with intellectual disabilities of Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa. To determine this, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the current state of employment and job-seeking among graduates with intellectual disabilities, including their employment status, types of work, job search activities, and perceived opportunities and challenges in the local context?
2. What themes emerge from participants' testimonies about navigating employment, including supports and barriers across personal, socioeconomic, cultural, school, and system levels, through the phases of seeking, obtaining, and maintaining work?
3. Based on these emergent themes, what feasible school-anchored and community-anchored strategies or interventions can be proposed to enhance employment access, placement, and retention for these graduates?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design aimed at understanding the employment perspectives and experiences of graduate students with intellectual disabilities from Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, the study sought to identify the factors that influence their ability to secure and maintain employment, as well as the socioeconomic, cultural, and policy-related barriers they encounter in the process.

The target population consisted of five graduate students with intellectual disabilities from Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa, aged between 25 and 50 years old. Participants were selected using snowball sampling, a voluntary recruitment method in which initial participants were asked to refer others who met the study's criteria. The study focused specifically on individuals who had been identified with intellectual disabilities as defined by the National Council for Disability Affairs, and who had graduated or completed their training at Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa whether on a part-time, full-time, or casual basis. Data were collected through key informant interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, with each session lasting between 20 and 40 minutes. A shorter interview duration was deliberately targeted to avoid disrupting participants' work schedules.

The sample size of five was chosen to prioritize depth over breadth, consistent with the principles of qualitative descriptive inquiry. This size allowed for longer interviews, careful coding, and clear connections between participant quotations and emerging themes. By the fourth and fifth interviews, no major new ideas were appearing, indicating that thematic sufficiency had been reached. The focus on a specific cohort from one program made a small, information-rich sample appropriate, and even within this size, variation in occupational roles and settings was present, encompassing positions such as service crew, housekeeping, and micro-enterprise. This variation helped ensure that emerging themes were not confined to a single job type. The small sample also reduced the burden placed on families and employers, respected participants' time and transportation constraints, and remained feasible within the study timeline while fully meeting the research objectives. The findings are understood to be context-bound to these graduates and their settings, with the intent of achieving transferability through thick description rather than statistical representativeness.

The inclusion criteria for participation were established to ensure that data derived from firsthand, recent employment experiences aligned with the study's purpose, that the group remained comparable enough for themes to be traced across similar contexts, and that participants' well-being was protected by including only those capable of consenting and, where needed, receiving support. Specifically, participants were required to be graduates with an identified intellectual disability as recorded by the school, to be currently employed or to have been employed within the last 12 months, to be at least 18 years old, to be able to

participate in a semi-structured interview with a parent or guardian present if preferred, to be willing to be audio-recorded and to allow the use of anonymized quotations, and to reside within the school's catchment area or local government unit so that interviews could be scheduled safely and ethically.

Reflecting on the experiences of graduates with intellectual disabilities as they entered paid work, three central insights emerged from the data and shaped the analytical orientation of the study. First, success in the early months of employment was found to depend not on policy or large-scale programs alone but on the daily actions of families, teachers, supervisors, and coworkers who remained present and supportive during the transition period. Supportive relationships-built confidence, made independence possible rather than replacing it, and helped graduates try, make mistakes, and persist. When such support was present, adjustment was smoother; when it was absent, even straightforward tasks became burdensome. Second, graduates consistently applied knowledge and skills acquired at school to their workplace roles, drawing on communication, teamwork, basic numeracy, cleanliness and safety routines, and specific vocational competencies. Skill transfer was most effective when school practice closely mirrored job tasks, with the use of consistent language, tools, and step-by-step guides shortening the learning curve and visual task cards and labeled materials proving particularly helpful. Third, many graduates expressed pride in their work and articulated aspirations for growth, including new responsibilities, additional stations to learn, or small business ventures. These aspirations were grounded in real, tangible progress and pointed to the importance of continued support beyond initial hiring, including short courses, cross-training, and mentoring opportunities. Together, these three dimensions formed a coherent sequence in which supportive relationships-built confidence, matched preparation enabled skill transfer, and early success generated motivation for further development. The themes that emerged from this reflection informed the recommendations presented in the subsequent chapter and provided the interpretive foundation for the thematic analysis.

All participants were graduates of Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa who met the criteria of having intellectual disabilities as defined by the National Council for Disability Affairs and having graduated or completed training at the special education center. All participants were fully aware of the context and nature of the research and signed an informed consent form prior to their participation.

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide specifically designed to explore the employment perspectives and experiences of graduates with intellectual disabilities from Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa. The guide comprised open-ended questions organized into thematic areas covering sociodemographic background, employment aspirations, challenges encountered in job searching and the workplace, and the influence of socioeconomic, cultural, and policy-related factors. This format provided the flexibility necessary for participants to share their experiences in depth while enabling the researcher to probe further into emerging themes as they arose during the course of each interview. To ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, a validation process was conducted in which the guide was reviewed by the research adviser for clarity and relevance, and revisions were made to ensure that questions were comprehensible, non-leading, and capable of eliciting rich and meaningful responses. A pilot test was subsequently conducted with a small subset of participants meeting the inclusion criteria to identify and address any potential issues with wording, flow, or scope, thereby further refining the guide prior to full implementation.

Data gathering was conducted through semi-structured interviews with former students with intellectual disabilities from Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa and their parents or guardians where applicable. Participants were identified through snowball sampling beginning with initial contacts who met the inclusion criteria. Prior to each interview, informed consent was

obtained from participants or their legal guardians, ensuring full understanding of the study's purpose, procedures, and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Interviews were scheduled at participants' preferred times and locations to ensure privacy and comfort, and were conducted using the validated interview guide. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure transcription accuracy, and field notes were taken throughout to capture additional contextual observations. All data were securely stored and confidentiality was maintained throughout the entire research process, fostering a supportive and non-judgmental environment for all participants.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework. The first phase involved familiarization with the data through meticulous transcription, repeated readings, and close engagement with the material. The second phase entailed the generation of initial codes through the application of first-line semantic codes to meaningful units of data. In the third phase, codes were collated into candidate themes and subthemes. The fourth phase involved reviewing these themes against coded extracts and the full dataset to assess coherence and representativeness. The fifth phase focused on defining and naming themes by refining thematic boundaries, writing analytic definitions, and assigning clear names. The sixth and final phase involved reporting, in which a clear, evidenced narrative was produced with illustrative extracts from the data. Axial consolidation was employed throughout to cluster related codes and surface emerging themes. Coding was led by the researcher, with peer debriefing provided by the research adviser to resolve discrepancies and refine the codebook. Final interpretation was situated within Bourdieu's theory of capital to explore how social, cultural, and economic factors shape the employment outcomes of graduates with intellectual disabilities.

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards throughout. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participants were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were securely stored in an encrypted folder, and all identifying information was removed through the use of pseudonyms designated as P1 through P5. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from Philippine Christian University. The credibility of the data was further enhanced through the cross-referencing of transcripts during analysis, and all generated themes are supported by verbatim extracts drawn directly from the actual interview transcripts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of interview transcripts collected from five graduates of Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa, a public special education center in San Pablo, Laguna, Philippines. The study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory, with participants recruited through snowball sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework, involving familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and narrative reporting. The discussion that follows is grounded entirely in the data gathered from participants and is interpreted in direct relation to the objectives of the study, which sought to describe graduates' employment perspectives and lived experiences and to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder access to meaningful work.

Participant profile

The five participants were four males and one female, ranging in age from 28 to 33 years old, each holding either a high school diploma or a vocational course certificate from Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa. Their employment circumstances reflected a diverse range of occupational arrangements. P1, a 32-year-old male with a high school diploma, was employed part-time as a caretaker and received compensation for his work. P2, a 30-year-old female with a vocational course credential, was self-employed as a full-time sari-sari store owner, though her earnings were reinvested into the business rather than drawn as a fixed salary. P3, a 28-year-old male with a high school diploma, was self-employed part-time as a balut vendor and received income from his sales. P4, a 31-year-old male with a high school diploma, was employed full-time as service crew in funeral services and received a salary. P5, a 33-year-old male with a vocational course credential, was employed full-time in hotel housekeeping and likewise received compensation. Together, these five participants represented a varied cohort spanning formal employment in hospitality and funeral services, self-employment in retail and vending, and a mix of full-time and part-time work arrangements, all reflecting the range of ways in which graduates with intellectual disabilities have navigated entry into the labor market.

P1 entered employment with strong self-belief and drew primarily on interpersonal skills including greeting people, coordinating simple tasks, and maintaining positive relations with coworkers. These everyday interactions formed the foundation of his workplace adjustment and enabled him to complete assigned duties on time, with an openness to taking on additional responsibilities as opportunities arose. P2 applied functional mathematics acquired through school-based canteen activities to daily pricing, change-making, and basic inventory management, with family guidance in the early weeks supporting the development of steady operational procedures. As her confidence grew, she began considering modest business improvements and potential new roles aligned with her interests and strengths. P3 transferred teamwork habits and cleanliness routines practiced at school into his nightly vending route, setting up efficiently, maintaining a tidy workspace, and sustaining good customer rapport. Family support eased his initial anxieties and helped him establish a consistent work rhythm, with future plans centered on expanding his selling hours or growing his micro-enterprise. P4 brought specific technical competencies from school, including basic repair and welding skills, which he applied to equipment tasks at his workplace. His confidence enabled a rapid adjustment to the schedule and expectations of the role, and he expressed a clear intention to progress within the service crew pathway. P5 relied on consistent guidance from family members who helped him maintain focus and punctuality during his transition to hotel housekeeping, a role that drew on communication, teamwork, and routine skills developed through vocational training. He expressed genuine enjoyment of the role and motivation to learn additional housekeeping stations over time.

Cultivating confidence through self-efficacy and support mechanisms

The first major theme to emerge from the analysis centered on participants' consistent reports of moderate to high confidence when beginning their respective employment roles, a confidence closely tied to the active and sustained involvement of family and peer support networks. All five participants referenced the presence of supportive figures as a key factor in their sense of readiness and capability. P1 articulated his initial confidence by stating, "Napaka kumpiyansa po sir kasi kaya ko naman po mag-walis at mag-bunot ng damo" (I am very confident, sir, because I can sweep and pull weeds). P2, while acknowledging a more moderate level of confidence, emphasized the continuous presence of her parents: "Katamtaman lang po,

pero lagi po silang nandiyan sina Mommy at Daddy para tumulong" (It is just average, but Mommy and Daddy are always there to help). P3 similarly credited familial support for his initial comfort in his role: "Medyo kumpiyansa po kasi noong una ay nariyan si Nanay at Ate para gabayan ako" (I was a little confident because at first my mother and sister were there to guide me). P4 expressed a high degree of confidence grounded in perceived competence: "Napaka-kumpiyansa po sir kasi alam ko kayang kayang ko iyon" (I am very confident, sir, because I know I can handle it). P5 underscored the ongoing guidance received from family: "Nariyan po silang Nanay at Ate na laging gumagabay sa akin" (My mother and sister are always there to guide me).

These statements collectively demonstrate that the perceived availability and active involvement of support networks, representing a significant form of social capital in Bourdieu's framework, were instrumental in cultivating and sustaining the participants' self-efficacy in their employment endeavors. Social capital in this context functioned not merely as a passive safety net but as an active force that translated external encouragement into internal conviction regarding participants' capabilities. This finding directly challenges the pervasive stereotype that individuals with intellectual disabilities inherently lack self-efficacy or are perpetually dependent on others (Keshwal, 2022; Strater et al., 2020). Consistent with Almalky (2020), who emphasized that employment enhances identity and self-worth, and Pascal (2023), who noted that workplace socialization fosters a sense of belonging and pride, the data suggest that access to strong social capital can be a primary determinant of the capacity of individuals with intellectual disabilities to enter and sustain meaningful participation in the labor market. Engelbrecht et al. (2022) further reinforced this finding by demonstrating that employment programs grounded in human rights and contextual support systems are critical to addressing occupational injustices faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. The challenges these participants faced were therefore not intrinsic to their disability but were substantially mediated by the presence or absence of inclusive relational networks, a systemic observation with significant implications for how schools, families, and employers design transitional support structures.

Bridging school and workforce through skill transfer and application

The second theme that emerged from the analysis revealed the effective transfer and practical application of skills acquired at Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa to a range of workplace demands. All five participants explicitly identified core soft skills, particularly communication and collaboration, as directly contributing to their job performance, while several also reported leveraging specific technical competencies that confirmed a strong and meaningful linkage between their vocational training and their real-world employment contexts. P1 noted the frequent utility of interpersonal skills in his daily work: "Pakikipag-usap at pakikisama po ang madalas kong nagagamit" (Communication and getting along with others are what I use most). P2 connected the basic mathematical skills she developed through school-based canteen activities to her current entrepreneurial role: "Pagkukuwenta po, dati sa canteen ko natutunan, kaya ngayon alam ko mag-benta ng sari-sari store" (I learned counting in the canteen, so now I know how to sell at a sari-sari store). P3 acknowledged the value of social skills and basic routines practiced at school: "Pakikisama at pagpupulot ng basura, natutunan ko po 'yan sa school" (I learned teamwork and picking up trash at school). P4 described the application of technical competencies in his workplace role: "Ginagamit ko po 'yung pagkukumpuni at welding skills ko sa pagtatrabaho ko sa funeral services dahil nakakapagkumpuni po ako ng mga sirang gamit at nakakapagwelding ng bakal" (I use my repair and welding skills in my

work at funeral services because I can fix broken items and weld metal). P5 referenced a broader set of vocational competencies: "Pakikipag-usap, pakikisama, at pagluluto po, lahat po 'yan ay natutunan ko sa vocational" (Communication, getting along with others, and cooking: I learned all of that in vocational school).

These accounts demonstrate the perceived relevance and direct applicability of the education received at Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa, confirming that the school effectively served as an institution for the accumulation of cultural capital, equipping participants with practical and social competencies valued in the labor market. This finding directly challenges the misconception that individuals with intellectual disabilities are inherently limited in their capacity for meaningful skill acquisition or practical application in demanding work environments (Karhina et al., 2021; Selander and Wall, 2023; Naberushkina, 2021). Fischer and Kilpatrick (2023) emphasized the importance of employer partnerships and hands-on vocational training in preparing students with disabilities for employment, and Shevlin et al. (2020) found that structured transition-to-work programs integrated with academic and practical learning significantly improve job readiness and placement outcomes. Iwanaga et al. (2022) further concluded that supported employment pathways incorporating on-the-job training produce better integration and longer-term employment for young adults with intellectual disabilities. Consistent with Grigal et al. (2023), who noted that academic interventions tailored to students with disabilities facilitate smoother employment transitions by reinforcing both functional and workplace-oriented skills, and with Drake and Wallach (2020), who emphasized that structured skill development through preparatory programs enhances psychological well-being and performance, the present findings affirm that investment in specialized educational programming constitutes a critical pathway for expanding the cultural capital of individuals with intellectual disabilities and thereby improving their employment outcomes.

Navigating change through emotional adaptation and future aspirations

The third theme captured the participants' emotional experiences during their school-to-work transition alongside their articulated aspirations for future career progression. Despite the inherent challenges of entering employment, including potential societal stigma and the demands of new workplace responsibilities, all five graduates described predominantly positive emotional responses characterized by excitement and happiness, and all voiced a desire for future career changes or advancements, revealing a dynamic interplay between current satisfaction and forward-oriented ambition. P1 encapsulated this duality by stating, "Masaya po sa una, pero gusto ko rin po ng ibang trabaho someday" (I was happy at first, but I also want a different job someday). P2 expressed initial excitement alongside continued openness to new roles: "Excited po ako sa simula, at gusto ko pa rin po subukan ang ibang role" (I was excited at the beginning, and I still want to try other roles). P3, while content with his current self-employment, expressed clear plans for expansion: "Masaya po sir, pero plano ko pong palawakin ang negosyo ng balot" (I am happy, sir, but I plan to expand the balut business). P4 found joy in his work and salary while aiming for advancement: "Masaya po sir kapag may sweldo, at balak ko pong mag-advance sa service career" (I am happy when there is a salary, and I plan to advance in my service career). P5, energized by the acquisition of new skills, also expressed a long-term desire for different employment: "Excited po ako sa bagong skills, gusto ko rin po ng ibang trabaho balang araw" (I am excited about the new skills, and I also want a different job someday).

These narratives collectively illustrate that the transition to employment, while largely positive emotionally, served simultaneously as a foundation for future professional aspirations and as evidence of a continuous process of personal and career development. This dynamic

reflects how individuals, having accumulated initial social and cultural capital, become motivated to enhance their economic capital and broaden their social standing over time. Keshwal (2022) found that employment builds self-determination skills among adults with intellectual disabilities, empowering them to take ownership of their professional trajectories, while Schwartz et al. (2021) observed that employment contributes positively to mental health and a sense of purpose when it aligns with individual strengths and preferences. These findings directly counter the stereotype that individuals with intellectual disabilities lack ambition or are passively content with limited opportunities (Verma and Karuppasamy, 2024), demonstrating instead that participants are active agents in shaping their careers and pursuing growth. Their aspirations for business expansion, career advancement, and new roles underscore the need for employment systems that extend beyond initial job placement to provide structured pathways for upskilling, mentorship, and entrepreneurial development, moving beyond the traditional and often segregating model of sheltered employment (Varkas, 2022; Shogren et al., 2020).

Overall implications and proposed output

The findings of this study, analyzed through the lens of Bourdieu's Capital Theory, offer significant and convergent insights into the employment experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The consistent demonstration of self-efficacy and confidence across all five participants, the successful transfer and application of diverse vocational and interpersonal skills, and the universal expression of future aspirations collectively challenge prevailing deficit-based narratives and reveal a population characterized by resilience, capability, and ambition. These findings indicate that the primary barriers to employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities are external and systemic rather than intrinsic to their disability. The social capital provided by families and peers functioned as an active enabling force rather than a substitute for independence. The cultural capital built through specialized education at Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa translated directly into workplace competence across diverse occupational settings. The positive emotional orientation and future-directed goals expressed by participants reflected a genuine drive to accumulate economic capital and achieve greater independence. When social, cultural, and economic capital are deliberately cultivated and mutually reinforcing, individuals with intellectual disabilities are not only able to enter the workforce but to sustain participation, adapt to demands, and aspire toward advancement.

In response to these findings, a proposed action framework was developed to address six identified areas of concern. The first concerns unclear onboarding in the first 90 days, for which the goal of settling in with confidence is supported through structured check-ins at weeks 1, 2, 4, 8, and 12; the assignment of a workplace buddy; and the provision of visual task cards, with the measure of success being independent functioning by week 12. The second area addresses supervisors and coworkers who are uncertain how to provide support, for which a 1.5-hour orientation, a one-page inclusive support guide, and the designation of a school contact are recommended, with successful completion of the orientation as the measurable outcome. The third area concerns misalignment between school practice and actual job tasks, addressed through employer visits or videos, the identification and classroom practice of the top ten job-specific tasks at least twice per month, and one simulation per quarter, with the measure being whether these tasks were practiced within the month. The fourth area addresses the lack of structured family support at home, for which two family mini-sessions, a weekly home checklist, and group chat or text reminders are recommended, with completion of the family sessions as the target measure. The fifth area concerns the absence of a job-person fit assessment prior to referral, addressed through a participant profile card, two workplace visits

or tryouts, and a mock interview process, with job fit confirmed by day 30 as the success indicator. The sixth area addresses the lack of a growth pathway after initial hiring, for which short skill lessons, cross-training opportunities, and referral to TESDA are recommended, with attainment of a new duty or certificate within 12 months as the measurable outcome. Taken together, these proposed interventions translate the study's thematic findings into actionable, school-anchored and community-anchored strategies designed to enhance employment access, placement, and long-term retention for graduates with intellectual disabilities. The findings and proposed framework presented in this chapter provide the empirical and practical foundation upon which the conclusions, recommendations, and directions for future inquiry in the succeeding chapter are built.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the employment experiences and perspectives of five graduates from Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa through a qualitative thematic analysis that yielded three primary themes: the cultivation of confidence through self-efficacy and support mechanisms, the transfer and application of school-acquired skills in the workplace, and the emotional adaptation experienced during transition alongside the future aspirations held by participants. The findings collectively illuminate the employment journeys of individuals with intellectual disabilities in ways that challenge persistent misconceptions about this population, and the conclusions drawn from these themes directly address the study's central concern with how graduates navigate, experience, and envision their employment trajectories.

The first major conclusion drawn from the findings is that confidence among graduates with intellectual disabilities is fundamentally relational in nature, rooted in and sustained by the social capital that family members and peers provide. Participants consistently reported high or moderate confidence when beginning their jobs, and this confidence was directly attributable to the practical and emotional support extended by their social networks through assistance with transportation, daily reminders, and steady encouragement during the initial period of workplace adjustment. The first weeks of employment were made demonstrably smoother by this consistent relational scaffolding, which bolstered participants' self-belief and their capacity to manage unfamiliar demands. This finding actively challenges the widely held stereotype that individuals with intellectual disabilities necessarily begin their employment journeys from a position of dependence or low self-efficacy, demonstrating instead that perceived capability is dynamically shaped by the quality and consistency of one's social environment. The implication is that supporting the social networks surrounding graduates is as important as any direct training or preparation offered to the graduates themselves, and that employment-support frameworks should formally recognize and strengthen these informal support structures.

The second major conclusion is that Paaralang Pag-ibig at Pag-asa effectively equips its graduates with the cultural capital necessary to transfer learned competencies into real workplace settings. The thematic analysis demonstrated that both soft skills, including communication and collaboration, and specific technical proficiencies acquired during schooling were applied directly and meaningfully in participants' places of employment. Graduates were able to follow workplace instructions, work alongside colleagues, serve customers, and adapt to new tasks because the school had built these capacities into their educational experience through attention to basic academics, structured routines, interpersonal communication, and teamwork. This finding refutes the notion that individuals with intellectual disabilities possess limited capacity for skill acquisition or practical application across diverse work contexts, and it affirms the indispensable role that specialized schools play in building the foundations for genuine workforce participation. The evidence supports a conclusion that

school-based learning, when designed with workplace relevance in mind, does transfer to real employment settings and produces graduates who are capable of meaningful contribution.

The third major conclusion is that graduates with intellectual disabilities demonstrate a strong orientation toward self-determination and are actively motivated to advance beyond their current employment circumstances. Participants described their transitions from school to work in largely positive emotional terms, and all five expressed clear aspirations for future career change or advancement, including entrepreneurial goals and the desire to develop small businesses. This ambition, which was articulated with specificity and personal investment, directly refutes the stereotype that individuals with intellectual disabilities are either content with minimal opportunity or lack the forward orientation necessary for career development. The presence of these aspirations, however, also reveals the extent to which current employment systems fall short of providing pathways through which such ambitions can be realized. Opportunities have largely reached these graduates through informal networks rather than through inclusive and equitable hiring structures, which means that the degree of success achieved has depended significantly on social access rather than on any formalized systemic support. Graduates would benefit substantially from structured and accessible pathways beyond first employment, encompassing mentoring relationships, short-form credentials, on-the-job skill development, connections to employers committed to inclusive hiring, and support for small-enterprise development.

The cumulative weight of these findings leads to a broader and overarching conclusion: the barriers to employment encountered by individuals with intellectual disabilities are predominantly systemic and external in character rather than intrinsic to the individuals themselves. The ability and ambition are demonstrably present among these graduates; what remains insufficient are the fair and structured conditions through which both can be fully expressed and rewarded. When social support is recognized and reinforced, and when school-built skills are valued by employers and embedded in inclusive hiring and advancement practices, graduates do not merely enter employment but are positioned to grow within it. The task now confronting schools, employers, policymakers, and community stakeholders is to build the equitable structures that allow the capacities already present in graduates with intellectual disabilities to be consistently recognized, supported, and advanced in the labor market. Future research would benefit from examining the long-term employment trajectories of graduates from comparable programs, the structural conditions that enable or impede career advancement, and the design of employment pathways that translate the aspirations documented in this study into sustained and measurable outcomes.

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