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A Comprehensive SLR of the Self Advocacy Movement: Understanding Issues, Importance, and Future Pathways

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ABSTRACT

This study gives a comprehensive Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on disability advocacy, with an emphasis on essential techniques, policy implications, and problems in achieving disability rights. Using Connected Papers and the review identified essential research and developing themes in the subject, with a focus on the Malaysian context. The analysis demonstrates that effective disability advocacy necessitates various tactics that include empowerment, accessibility improvements, and community participation to address the systemic hurdles that people with disabilities encounter. The thematic synthesis found recurring challenges, such as inadequate accessibility, social stigma, and gaps in policy enforcement, which inhibit growth despite existing legal frameworks. The findings underscore the necessity of inclusive policy making and the need for a more robust theoretical base that addresses intersecting identities within the disability community. The study provides practical insights, advising that future studies look at novel, culturally sensitive advocacy tactics, as well as the potential of digital platforms to promote advocacy activities. This review emphasizes the need for a collaborative strategy, in which policymakers, advocacy groups, and communities work together to improve disability inclusion and policy efficacy, thereby producing a more fairs society.

Keywords: intrinsic motivation, job training, employee performance, klang valley, human resource development

INTRODUCTION

Advocacy in disability research is an important and growing field that seeks to address systemic barriers experienced by persons with disabilities while promoting their rights, inclusion, and meaningful participation across various spheres of society. This field is strongly informed by international human rights frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which emphasises dignity, individual autonomy, non-discrimination, full participation, equality of opportunity, and accessibility as core principles for advancing the rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). The CRPD also reflects a broader shift from viewing disability through a charitable or medical lens toward recognising persons with disabilities as rights-bearing individuals who should be able to participate equally in society (United Nations, 2006; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Therefore, advocacy-oriented disability research does not merely identify the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, but also seeks to produce knowledge that can support policy reform, inclusive practices, and the removal of barriers in education, employment, healthcare, social participation, and other essential services (Oliver, 1992; Shakespeare, 2013; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Recent disability research further emphasises that inclusive and accessible research practices are essential because excluding persons with disabilities from knowledge production may result in incomplete data and weak policy responses (Watharow & Wayland, 2022; Wayland & Watharow, 2025).

A central feature of disability advocacy research is the use of participatory, emancipatory, and inclusive research methodologies that position persons with disabilities as active contributors rather than passive subjects of investigation. This approach challenges traditional research practices that have often excluded disabled people from decision-making processes and treated them mainly as objects of study (Oliver, 1992; Kitchin, 2000). Inclusive research emphasises collaboration, shared authority, accessibility, and the recognition of lived experience as a valid source of knowledge (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003; Nind, 2014; Watharow & Wayland, 2022). By incorporating the voices, experiences, and priorities of persons with disabilities, researchers are able to generate findings that are more contextually relevant, socially meaningful, and closely connected to the realities of the communities being studied (Kitchin, 2000; Nind, 2017; Wayland & Watharow, 2025). This approach is also consistent with the disability rights movement's principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us," which stresses the importance of self-advocacy, representation, empowerment, and direct participation of persons with disabilities in research, policy, and practice (Charlton, 1998; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). Recent studies also argue that inclusive research should move beyond tokenistic participation by ensuring that persons with disabilities are involved in research design, data collection, analysis, dissemination, and policy translation (Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2024; Wayland & Watharow, 2025).

Disability advocacy research covers a broad range of areas, including accessible healthcare, inclusive education, employment rights, social protection, independent living, accessibility, and community participation. These areas are central to advancing social justice because disability is not only an individual condition, but also a social and structural issue shaped by barriers within institutions, environments, and public attitudes (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). In this regard, advocacy research plays an important role in translating evidence into policy recommendations, inclusive service delivery, and community-based interventions that improve the lives of persons with disabilities (Barnes & Mercer, 2006; Rugoho, 2019). Recent participatory disability research involving youth with disabilities across seven African countries also demonstrates that involving persons with disabilities in research can strengthen the relevance of findings for education and employment policy and practice (Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2024). Collaboration among researchers, policymakers, disability organisations, service providers, and local communities is therefore essential to ensure that research findings are not confined to academic discussion, but are transformed into practical advocacy strategies and systemic change. Such partnerships help bridge the gap between knowledge production and policy implementation, thereby contributing to the development of more inclusive, accessible, and equitable communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Advocacy in Disabilities Research

The theoretical foundation of advocacy in disability research is strongly shaped by the social model of disability, which shifts the understanding of disability from an individual deficit to a form of social exclusion produced by environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers. This perspective emphasises that persons with disabilities are often disabled not merely by impairment, but by social structures that fail to accommodate human diversity and equal participation (Oliver, 1992; Shakespeare, 2013). In this regard, advocacy in disability research is concerned with identifying and challenging systemic barriers that restrict access to education, employment, healthcare, public services, and community participation.

The rights-based framework further strengthens advocacy in disability research by positioning persons with disabilities as rights-holders rather than passive recipients of care or charity. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) provides an international human rights framework that promotes dignity, autonomy, non-discrimination, accessibility, equality of opportunity, and full participation for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). The CRPD also reflects a global shift toward recognising disability inclusion as a matter of justice, equality, and human rights rather than welfare alone. Therefore, advocacy-oriented disability research plays an important role in producing evidence that can support inclusive policy reform, institutional accountability, and the removal of barriers that continue to marginalise persons with disabilities.

Participatory and Inclusive Research

A major methodological development in disability advocacy research is the increasing use of participatory and inclusive research approaches. Historically, disability research has been criticised for treating persons with disabilities as objects of study rather than active contributors to knowledge production. Oliver (1992) argued that traditional disability research often failed to improve the lives of disabled people because it maintained unequal power relations between researchers and researched communities. This critique has encouraged scholars to develop more inclusive forms of research that involve persons with disabilities as collaborators, advisors, co-researchers, and knowledge producers.

Participatory and inclusive research approaches are important because they allow the lived experiences, priorities, and perspectives of persons with disabilities to shape the research process. These approaches are consistent with the disability rights principle of “Nothing About Us Without Us,” which highlights the importance of representation, self-advocacy, and direct participation in decisions affecting disabled communities (Charlton, 1998). Recent scholarship also argues that inclusive research should move beyond tokenistic involvement by ensuring accessibility, shared decision-making, and meaningful participation throughout research design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Watharow & Wayland, 2022; Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2024; Wayland & Watharow, 2025). In this sense, participatory disability research strengthens advocacy by producing findings that are more socially grounded, ethically responsive, and relevant to the actual needs of persons with disabilities.

Accessibility, Education, Healthcare and Employment

Disability advocacy research addresses several key areas, including accessibility, inclusive education, healthcare access, employment rights, independent living, and community participation. Accessibility remains a central concern because physical, digital, institutional, and social barriers continue to limit the participation of persons with disabilities in everyday life. The World Health Organization and World Bank (2011) reported that persons with disabilities experience unequal outcomes in healthcare, education, employment, and social participation, often because of inaccessible environments, inadequate services, discriminatory attitudes, and weak policy implementation.

Inclusive education is another important focus of disability advocacy research. It promotes the right of students with disabilities to access quality education within learning environments that recognise diversity, provide appropriate support, and reduce exclusionary practices. Similarly, healthcare advocacy focuses on improving access to disability-sensitive services, reducing discrimination in healthcare settings, and strengthening the capacity of professionals to respond to the needs of persons with disabilities. Employment rights are also central because persons with disabilities often face labour market exclusion, limited workplace accommodations, and unequal opportunities for economic participation. Therefore, advocacy research in these areas contributes to the development of inclusive policies, accessible services, and evidence-based interventions that support the full participation of persons with disabilities in society (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011; Shakespeare, 2013; Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2024).

Current Debates and Challenges in Disability Advocacy Research

Despite significant progress, disability advocacy research continues to face several debates and challenges. One major debate concerns the balance between specialised support and full inclusion within mainstream systems. While specialised services may be necessary to respond to specific needs, excessive reliance on separate systems may reinforce segregation and limit broader social participation. Therefore, disability advocacy research must consider how support can be provided without weakening the principle of inclusion (Shakespeare, 2013).

Another important challenge concerns representation and diversity. Disability is not a homogeneous experience because persons with disabilities differ according to gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, cultural background, type of impairment, geographical location, and access to resources. As a result, advocacy research must adopt more intersectional and inclusive approaches to ensure that the voices of diverse disability communities are represented. Recent participatory research also shows that involving persons with disabilities directly in the research process can improve the relevance of findings for policy and practice, particularly in areas such as education and employment (Bannink Mbazzi et al., 2024). Overall, disability advocacy research remains an important field because it connects academic knowledge with social justice, policy reform, institutional change, and the lived realities of persons with disabilities.

Background of Disability Advocacy

Disability rights advocacy has gained increasing global attention through the development of international human rights instruments, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The CRPD provides a global framework for promoting, protecting, and ensuring the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). It also strengthens the understanding that disability inclusion is not only a matter of welfare or service provision, but also a matter of equality, accessibility, dignity, and justice.

In addition to international legal frameworks, disability advocacy has been shaped by disability-led movements, civil society organisations, researchers, policymakers, and community-based actors. These groups play an important role in raising public awareness, challenging stigma, promoting inclusive policies, and supporting the participation of persons with disabilities in society. However, despite the growing recognition of disability rights, many persons with disabilities continue to experience barriers in education, healthcare, employment, transportation, public participation, and access to services (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Therefore, sustained advocacy remains necessary at local, national, and international levels to ensure that disability rights are translated into meaningful practice and systemic change.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, supported by Connected Papers, to identify, map, and synthesise relevant literature on disability advocacy. The SLR approach was selected because it enables researchers to locate, evaluate, and organise existing scholarly evidence in a structured and transparent manner. In this study, Connected Papers was used as a supplementary tool to visually map related studies and identify key publications within the field of disability advocacy. A foundational article was selected as the origin paper, and Connected Papers was then used to generate a network graph of related literature based on citation relationships, co-citation patterns, and bibliographic coupling.

The use of Connected Papers enabled the researcher to identify both directly and indirectly related publications within the field. The visual network assisted in locating influential works, emerging themes, and clusters of studies that were conceptually connected to the selected origin paper. The papers identified through Connected Papers were then screened using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Particular attention was given to studies related to disability advocacy, self-advocacy, policy implications, inclusion, rights-based approaches, and regional issues, especially within the Malaysian context.

In addition to Connected Papers, searches were also conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus, PubMed, and Web of Science. Keywords generated from the Connected Papers mapping process were used to refine and strengthen the database search strategy. This helped ensure a broader and more inclusive retrieval of relevant literature. Articles obtained from both Connected Papers and academic databases were first screened based on their titles and abstracts. Studies that met the initial criteria were then reviewed in full to determine their relevance to the objectives of the review.

Connected Papers operates based on the principles of co-citation and bibliographic coupling. When two papers share similar references or are frequently cited together, they are considered more likely to be conceptually related. The platform uses these relationships to generate a force-directed graph that organises relevant papers into visual clusters while separating less relevant studies. Within the graph, each node represents a paper, and the proximity between nodes reflects the degree of similarity between studies. Connected Papers retrieves bibliographic data from the Semantic Scholar Paper Corpus, which is licensed under ODC-BY.

To generate a graph, the researcher may enter a search string, paper title, Semantic Scholar paper, or PubMed paper into Connected Papers. The platform then identifies relevant publications and allows the researcher to select the most appropriate origin paper. Based on this origin paper, Connected Papers produces a visual map of related studies using a specialised algorithm that combines citation relationships and bibliographic coupling. This process supports the exploration of the literature by allowing researchers to trace key studies, identify research clusters, and recognise potential gaps within the field.

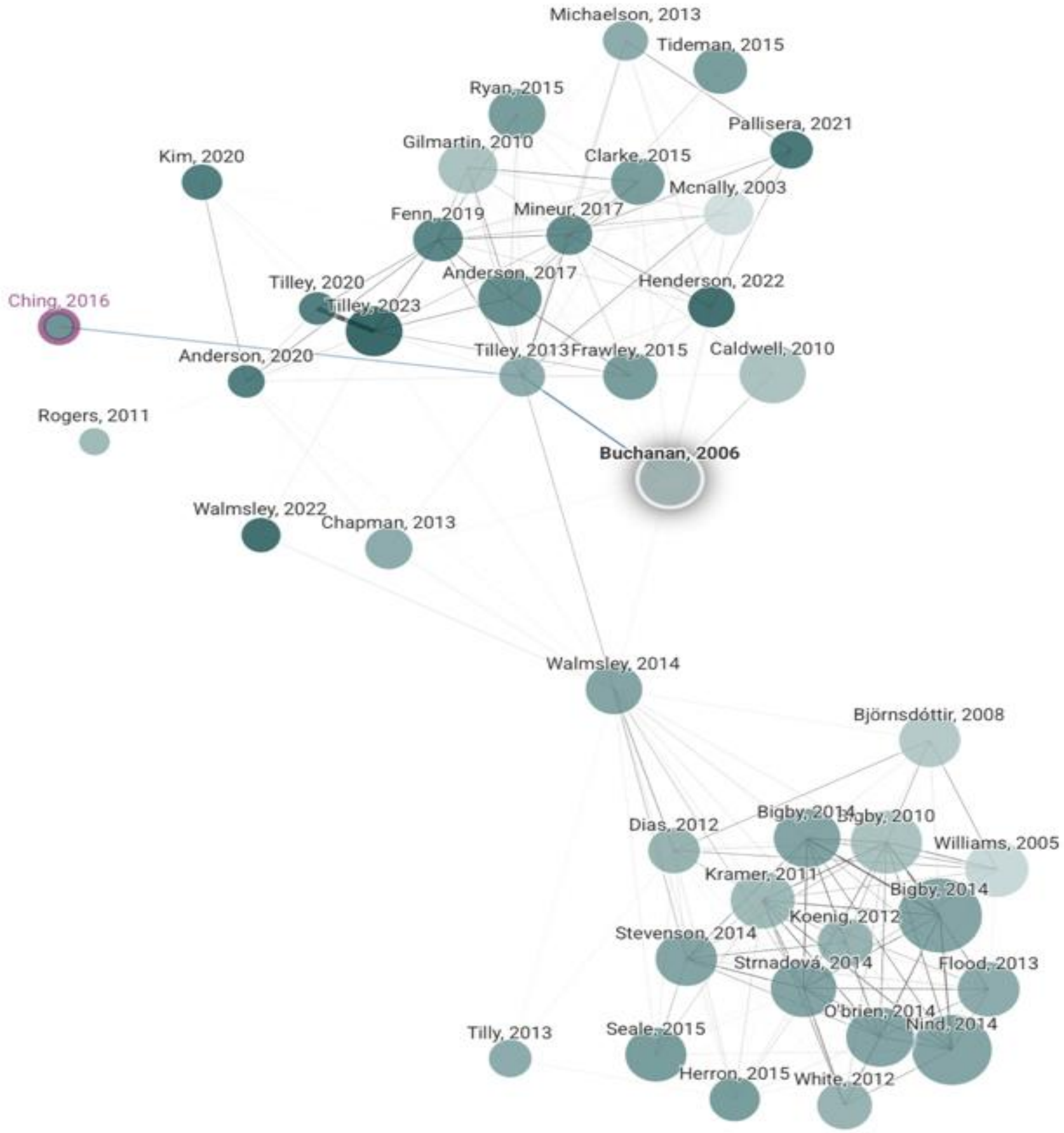

Figure 1. Network visualization (Connected Papers) related with topic of advocacy disabilities research

FINDINGS

Table 1 summarises selected studies on self-advocacy and inclusive disability research. The reviewed literature indicates that self-advocacy contributes to identity development, empowerment, confidence, leadership, social participation, and subjective well-being among persons with intellectual disabilities. However, most existing studies are concentrated in Western contexts and often rely on small-scale or qualitative designs. The literature also shows limited longitudinal evidence, limited cross-cultural comparison, and insufficient empirical attention to the Malaysian context. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how self-advocacy and disability advocacy are shaped by cultural, institutional, and policy-related factors in Malaysia.

Table 1 Key Contributions and Research Gaps in Self-Advocacy and Inclusive Disability Research

No	Author(s)	Research Focus	Key Contribution	Research Gap
1	Anderson & Bigby (2017)	Self-advocacy and identity formation	Self-advocacy groups support positive identity, confidence, autonomy, and self-expression among people with intellectual disabilities.	Limited geographical scope and lack of longitudinal evidence.
2	Anderson & Bigby (2020)	Supporters' roles in self-advocacy groups	Supporters play important roles but may unintentionally limit autonomy through excessive guidance.	Limited cross-cultural and organisational comparison of support roles.
3	Bigby & Frawley (2010)	Inclusive research practice	Highlights the need to adapt research methods to support meaningful participation.	Lacks a clear and transferable framework for inclusive research.
4	Bigby et al. (2014a)	Collaborative inclusive research	Collaborative methods enhance engagement, ownership, and participation among people with intellectual disabilities.	Limited quantitative evidence on the impact of collaborative methods.
5	Bigby et al. (2014b)	Conceptualising inclusive research	Proposes inclusive research as co-production involving people with disabilities as research partners.	Requires further empirical validation across diverse settings.
6	Björnsdóttir & Svensdóttir (2008)	Collaborative life histories	Life history methods provide ownership, voice, and self-expression.	Limited analysis of long-term psychological effects.
7	Buchanan & Walmsley (2006)	Historical development of self-advocacy	Traces the evolution and milestones of the self-advocacy movement.	Mainly focused on the UK context.
8	Caldwell (2010)	Leadership development	Self-advocacy promotes leadership, confidence, and skill development.	Limited longitudinal evidence on leadership sustainability.
9	Chapman & Tilley (2013)	Ethics of self-advocacy support	Emphasises dignity, respect, autonomy, and ethical supporter involvement.	Limited practical guidance for applying ethical support frameworks.
10	Pang et al. (2016)	Self-advocacy in Malaysia	Identifies stigma, funding constraints, lack of resources, and future directions for Malaysia.	Limited empirical evidence and cultural analysis in the Malaysian context.
11	Clarke et al. (2015)	Meaning of self-advocacy group involvement	Participation enhances social connection, confidence, and personal growth.	Small sample size and limited group comparison.
12	Conder et al. (2011)	Participatory research with disabled researchers	Highlights empowerment, self-esteem, and research skill development.	Limited evidence on sustainability of acquired research skills.
13	Fenn & Scior (2019)	Psychological and social impact	Self-advocacy improves well-being, social skills, and self-esteem.	Limited explanation of mechanisms behind positive outcomes.
14	Frawley & Bigby (2015)	First-generation self-advocates	Self-advocacy provides belonging, purpose, and social connection.	Limited focus on later generations and intersectional identities.
15	Henderson & Bigby (2022)	Historical self-advocacy movement	Examines early radical activism and development of self-advocacy organisations.	Limited practical application for current advocacy strategies.
16	Kim et al. (2020)	Self-advocacy in Korea	Promotes storytelling, confidence, socialisation, and community belonging.	Limited analysis of non-Western barriers and cross-cultural comparison.

17	Mineur et al. (2017)	Self-advocacy in Sweden	Improves identity, daily functioning, and personal rights awareness.	Limited generalisability beyond the Swedish welfare context.
18	O'Brien et al. (2014)	Co-researching with people with intellectual disabilities	Co-researching enhances engagement, collaboration, and mutual understanding.	Limited inclusion of individuals with more complex disabilities.
19	Ryan & Griffiths (2015)	Impact of self-advocacy	Self-advocacy strengthens independence, empowerment, and quality of life.	Limited attention to cultural and socioeconomic diversity.
20	Seale et al. (2015)	Participatory research space	Introduces inclusive "third spaces" for collaborative research.	Limited guidance on scalability beyond research settings.
21	Strnadová et al. (2014)	Inclusive research team-building	Team-building and skills training improve collaboration and inclusivity.	Limited long-term evidence on training outcomes.
22	Tilley et al. (2020)	Systematic review of self-advocacy organisations	Self-advocacy organisations positively influence subjective well-being and social relationships.	Limited evidence on differences by group structure and leadership.
23	Walmsley et al. (2022)	History of self-advocacy in England	Documents 50 years of self-advocacy development and milestones.	Limited to English context and lacks international comparison.
24	Williams & Simons (2005)	Role of nondisabled researchers	Nondisabled researchers can support participation while respecting autonomy.	Limited analysis of long-term collaboration dynamics.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Figure 2. Emerging Themes in Self-Advocacy and Disability-Advocacy Research

Based on the findings indicate that self-advocacy groups provide significant benefits for individuals with intellectual disabilities, particularly in relation to autonomy, self-confidence, identity development, and social belonging. Previous studies have shown that participation in self-advocacy initiatives can enhance self-identity, strengthen social integration, and support the overall quality of life of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Gilmartin & Slevin, 2010; Tideman & Svensson, 2015). Similarly, Tilley et al. (2020) found that involvement in self-advocacy organisations contributes positively to subjective well-being by providing members with emotional support, social connection, and a sense of purpose. However, despite these positive outcomes, the long-term impact of self-advocacy participation remains insufficiently understood. Much of the existing literature relies on cross-sectional or small-scale qualitative designs, which limits the ability to determine how self-advocacy influences identity, well-being, empowerment, and social participation over time.

The review also reveals the need for greater cultural and contextual diversity in self-advocacy research. Although studies such as Kim et al. (2020) have begun to examine self-advocacy in non-Western contexts, much of the existing scholarship remains concentrated in Western countries. This limits the extent to which findings can be generalised across different cultural, institutional, and welfare contexts. Comparative studies are therefore necessary to understand how cultural norms, social attitudes, policy environments, family structures, and welfare systems shape the experiences and outcomes of self-advocacy. For example, Tideman and Svensson (2015) demonstrated that welfare systems may influence the role and impact of self-advocacy among young people with intellectual disabilities. Expanding the geographical and cultural scope of research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how self-advocacy operates across diverse socio-economic and policy settings, particularly in under-researched contexts such as Malaysia.

Self-Advocacy and Identity Formation

Self-advocacy plays a central role in shaping identity, autonomy, and personal agency among individuals with intellectual disabilities. Anderson and Bigby (2017) and Mineur et al. (2017) demonstrated that participation in self-advocacy groups can foster self-confidence, strengthen identity formation, and improve daily functioning. These findings suggest that self-advocacy is not merely a form of collective participation, but also a process through which individuals develop a stronger sense of self, voice, and personal capability. Fenn and Scior (2019) further highlighted the psychological and social benefits of self-advocacy, particularly in terms of improved self-esteem, social skills, and emotional well-being.

However, the existing literature provides limited evidence on whether these positive outcomes are sustained over time. Most studies focus on immediate or short-term experiences of participation, while longitudinal research remains limited. This creates a gap in understanding how self-advocacy contributes to long-term identity development, autonomy, and life outcomes. In addition, cultural and geographical limitations remain evident in the literature. As noted in studies such as Björnsdóttir and Svensdóttir (2008), broader contextual analysis is required to determine whether identity-related outcomes of self-advocacy are experienced similarly across different societies, welfare systems, and cultural settings.

Leadership and Empowerment

Leadership development and empowerment are also prominent themes in self-advocacy research. Caldwell (2010) and Tilley (2013) showed that self-advocacy provides opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to develop leadership skills, decision-making capacity, and greater confidence in expressing their views. These studies indicate that self-advocacy groups can function as important spaces for individuals to practise leadership, negotiate choices, and participate more actively in matters affecting their lives. Ryan and Griffiths (2015) further argued that empowerment through self-advocacy can enhance independence, social connection, and quality of life.

Nevertheless, important gaps remain in relation to the sustainability of leadership development. Existing studies provide limited explanation of the support structures required to maintain leadership roles among self-advocates over time. There is also insufficient evidence on how leadership experiences differ according to disability type, communication ability, gender, socio-economic background, and cultural context. Since much of the literature is based on Western experiences, as reflected in Walmsley et al. (2022), greater attention should be given to non-Western contexts where cultural expectations, family roles, institutional practices, and policy structures may shape empowerment differently.

Participatory and Inclusive Research

Participatory and inclusive research has become an important methodological approach in disability advocacy research. Bigby et al. (2014) and Kramer et al. (2011) demonstrated that inclusive research methods can enhance participant ownership, improve the relevance of findings, and strengthen the accuracy of interpretation. By involving individuals with intellectual disabilities as co-researchers or active contributors, research becomes more responsive to lived experience and less dependent on researcher assumptions. White and Morgan (2012) also showed that involvement in research can support personal growth, confidence, and a stronger sense of contribution among individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Despite these contributions, inclusive research continues to face practical and methodological challenges. One major issue concerns scalability, particularly when inclusive research approaches are applied across different settings, disability groups, or levels of support need. Conder et al. (2011) highlighted that researchers may face difficulties in adapting research methods to accommodate diverse abilities and communication needs. Therefore, future research should develop clearer methodological guidance on how participatory and inclusive approaches can be implemented ethically, consistently, and effectively across different research contexts.

Ethical and Cultural Considerations

Ethical and cultural considerations are crucial in self-advocacy and disability advocacy research. Chapman and Tilley (2013) emphasised that support for self-advocacy must be grounded in respect, dignity, autonomy, and careful attention to power relations. Supporters, researchers, and practitioners must ensure that their involvement strengthens rather than restricts the voice and agency of persons with disabilities. This is particularly important because inappropriate or excessive support may unintentionally reproduce dependency or limit independent decision-making.

Cultural context also plays an important role in shaping self-advocacy experiences. Kim et al. (2020), for example, showed that storytelling and group participation can foster confidence, socialisation, and community belonging in the Korean context. Meanwhile, Pang et al. (2016) highlighted several challenges affecting the self-advocacy movement in Malaysia, including stigma, limited funding, lack of resources, and the need for stronger institutional support. These findings suggest that self-advocacy cannot be understood through a universal framework alone. Instead, advocacy strategies must be culturally sensitive and responsive to local social norms, policy environments, and community structures.

Challenges and Gaps in Support

The role of supporters is one of the most complex issues in self-advocacy research. Anderson and Bigby (2020) found that supporters often experience tension between facilitating independence and providing guidance. While support is necessary to enable participation, excessive guidance may unintentionally restrict autonomy and reproduce unequal power dynamics within self-advocacy groups. This highlights the need for careful reflection on how support can be provided without undermining self-determination.

Resource limitations and supporter training also remain important challenges. McNally (2003) and Gilmartin and Slevin (2010) emphasised that self-advocacy groups often require adequate resources, skilled facilitation, and ongoing support to function effectively. Conder et al. (2011) further showed that intellectually disabled researchers may encounter diverse challenges in participatory research, particularly when support systems are not sufficiently flexible or responsive. Therefore, future research should examine adaptive support models that balance guidance, independence, accessibility, and empowerment.

Historical and Policy Perspectives

Historical and policy-oriented studies provide important insights into the development of self-advocacy movements. Walmsley et al. (2022) documented the historical development of self-advocacy in England, showing how advocacy movements evolved in response to changing social, political, and institutional conditions. Pallisera (2021) similarly examined policy developments affecting people with intellectual disabilities over time. These studies are valuable because they situate self-advocacy within broader historical and policy contexts rather than treating it only as an individual or group-level activity.

However, much of the historical literature remains concentrated in specific regions, particularly the United Kingdom and other Western contexts. This limits understanding of how self-advocacy movements have developed in non-Western societies. Comparative analysis involving countries with different welfare systems, cultural values, and policy frameworks is therefore needed. As suggested by Tideman and Svensson (2015), welfare systems can shape the role and outcomes of self-advocacy. Future studies should therefore examine how policy environments influence the growth, sustainability, and effectiveness of self-advocacy movements in different national contexts.

Well-Being and Social Connection

The reviewed literature also shows that self-advocacy contributes meaningfully to well-being and social connection. Frawley and Bigby (2015) and Tilley et al. (2020) found that self-advocacy participation can enhance quality of life, social relationships, personal purpose, and subjective well-being. Similarly, Clarke, Camilleri, and Goding (2015) and Gilmartin and Slevin (2010) reported that self-advocacy groups provide emotional support, friendship, belonging, and opportunities for personal expression.

These findings suggest that self-advocacy groups are not only platforms for rights-based advocacy, but also social spaces that support emotional and relational well-being. However, the long-term effects of participation remain under-researched. Henderson and Bigby (2022) noted the importance of understanding the historical and evolving nature of self-advocacy, but further empirical work is needed to examine how sustained involvement affects well-being, social identity, and community participation over time. Future research should therefore explore whether the positive social and psychological outcomes of self-advocacy are maintained, strengthened, or weakened across different life stages and advocacy contexts.

Overall, the findings indicate that self-advocacy has significant potential to promote identity formation, empowerment, leadership, social connection, and well-being among individuals with intellectual disabilities. At the same time, the review highlights several limitations in the existing literature, including the lack of longitudinal evidence, limited cultural diversity, insufficient attention to non-Western contexts, and the need for more practical frameworks for inclusive research and support. These gaps are particularly relevant to Malaysia, where disability advocacy and self-advocacy remain underexplored in academic research. Therefore, future studies should adopt more culturally responsive, participatory, and comparative approaches to better understand how disability advocacy can be strengthened in diverse social and policy contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of advocacy in advancing disability rights and promoting inclusive policy development. The systematic review of existing literature identified several key themes in disability advocacy, including the empowerment of persons with disabilities, the promotion of accessibility, the strengthening of self-advocacy, and the importance of community participation. By employing Connected Papers alongside systematic database screening, this study was able to identify and synthesise a substantial body of literature that reflects the diverse strategies, outcomes, and challenges associated with disability advocacy across different contexts, including Malaysia.

The findings emphasise that disability advocacy remains essential in addressing systemic barriers such as policy implementation gaps, institutional limitations, inadequate accessibility, and persistent societal stigma. Theoretical insights drawn from the reviewed literature further suggest that advocacy should be grounded in rights-based, participatory, and intersectional approaches. Such approaches are necessary to ensure that advocacy strategies are responsive to the diverse identities, lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and socio-economic realities within disability communities.

Future research should extend the current findings by examining innovative advocacy strategies, the role of digital platforms in disability activism, and the long-term impact of advocacy on policy change and social inclusion. Longitudinal and comparative studies would also be valuable in assessing how advocacy outcomes develop across different cultural, institutional, and policy contexts. Ultimately, strengthening disability advocacy requires sustained collaboration among governments, researchers, disability organisations, service providers, and local communities. Such collective efforts are essential to building a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable society for persons with disabilities.

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