

**USE OF SELF-ADVOCACY IN PEER MEDIATION FOR  
CONFLICT RESOLUTION BY  
YOUNG ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:  
A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

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**FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA  
KUALA LUMPUR**

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A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

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**THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
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## ABSTRACT

The self-advocacy movement has provided avenues for young adults with learning disabilities to speak up their needs, but not to manage conflicts among themselves. This study seeks to understand the practicality of peer mediation for conflict resolution using self-advocacy skills by young adults with learning disabilities in Malaysia. Training manuals were designed and adapted to develop and train peer mediators to manage conflicts based on the model of self-advocacy, peer mediation and conflict resolution. The experiences of peer mediators were explored throughout the learning process highlighting the connection between self-advocacy and conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities. Participatory action research was adopted as a natural methodological choice consisted of three cycles of action and learning based on the research questions to achieve the objectives of the study. Voices of young adults with learning disabilities were upheld within the support system to realise their potential through the emancipation of self to social empowerment through peer mediation. The peer mediation development cycle began with envisioning the need for change, designing the services, and initiating a process to bring that change about in the first cycle. The second cycle marked the practical usage of peer mediation to enable the design of services into a continuous improvement of services provided to, and by young adults with learning disabilities in its practical context. The third cycle dealt with sharing of knowledge and experience whilst making a case for the use of self-advocacy in peer mediation services, and planning to ensure the service continues to engage with the community and to renew itself. Three common themes emerged from the thematic analysis from the experiences of peer mediation, namely the understanding on the role of peer mediators, the ability of peer mediators to resolve conflicts and the roles of self-

advocacy in peer mediation. The process of self-emancipation became proactive in the third cycle where the peer mediators were involved in the process of participatory action research as research partners. This has unearthed the fourth research question and added value to the role of self-advocacy underpinning the value of collaboration as a paradigm shift in the learning disability research and study in Malaysia. Specifically, this study hopes to provide insight into the complexity in representing young adults with learning disabilities besides giving them a space for self-advocacy and collective advocacy with quality of support from the support system. From the unknown to the confidence of knowing and doing, this study hopes to make connections between practice and theory where people can enjoy peace, justice, equality in the midst to understand complexities of life in learning and supporting each other. It is hoped that a wider audience will come to understand the empowering discourses and simplistic representation of young adults with learning disabilities which will truly make an impact towards peacemaking and the meaning of life.

Keywords: self-advocacy, peer mediation, conflict resolution, learning disability, participatory action research

**PENGGUNAAN ADVOKASI DIRI SEBAGAI MEDIATOR RAKAN SEBAYA  
UNTUK PENYELESAIAN KONFLIK OLEH GOLONGAN DEWASA MUDA  
BERMASALAH PEMBELAJARAN: SATU KAJIAN TINDAKAN  
PARTISIPATORI**

**ABSTRAK**

Pergerakan advokasi diri telah memberi peluang kepada dewasa muda bermasalah pembelajaran menyuarakan diri tetapi bukan untuk menangani konflik dalam kalangan mereka. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk memahami proses pendamaian rakan sebaya terhadap penyelesaian konflik berasaskan kemahiran advokasi diri secara praktikal dalam kalangan dewasa muda bermasalah pembelajaran di Malaysia. Manual latihan dicipta dan disesuaikan untuk melatih mediator rakan sebaya untuk menyelesaikan konflik berdasarkan model advokasi diri, pendamaian rakan sebaya dan penyelesaian konflik. Pengalaman mediator rakan sebaya diterokai sepanjang proses pembelajaran menyerlahkan hubungan antara advokasi diri dan penyelesaian konflik oleh golongan dewasa muda bermasalah pembelajaran. Kajian ini merupakan kajian tindakan partisipatori sebagai satu cara semulajadi yang merangkumi tiga pusingan tindakan dan pembelajaran berdasarkan soalan kajian untuk mencapai matlamat kajian ini. Suara dewasa muda bermasalah pembelajaran telah ditegakkan dalam sistem sokongan untuk menyedarkan potensi mereka melalui pembebasan diri terhadap pemberdayaan sosial melalui pendamaian rakan sebaya. Pembangunan pusingan pendamaian rakan sebaya bermula dengan mengenalpasti keperluan untuk berubah, mereka perkhidmatan dan memulakan satu proses untuk mencapai perubahan dalam pusingan pertama. Pusingan kedua merupakan langkah praktikal pendamaian rakan sebaya untuk membolehkan rekaan perkhidmatan diperbaiki sebagai suatu perkhidmatan yang bermanfaat kepada dewasa muda bermasalah pembelajaran. Pusingan ketiga merangkumi perkongsian pengetahuan dan

pengalaman untuk penggunaan advokasi diri dalam pendamaian rakan sebaya, serta melakukan pelan untuk memastikan perkhidmatan pendamaian rakan sebaya diteruskan dan diperbaiki bersamaan dengan pembangunan masyarakat. Tiga tema didapati daripada analisis tematik berasaskan pengalaman pendamaian rakan sebaya, iaitu: pemahaman peranan mediator rakan sebaya, kebolehan mediator rakan sebaya untuk menyelesaikan konflik dan peranan advokasi diri dalam proses pendamaian rakan sebaya. Proses pembebasan diri menjadi proaktif di pusiangan ketiga dengan soalan kajian keempat semasa mediator rakan sebaya melibatkan diri dalam proses kajian tindakan partisipatori sebagai pengkaji rakan kongsi. Penglibatan mereka telah menambah nilai kepada peranan advokasi diri selaras dengan nilai bekerjasama sebagai suatu langkah paradigm dalam kajian dan pembelajaran dewasa muda bermasalah pembelajaran di Malaysia. Secara khusus, kajian ini diharap dapat memberi pandangan terhadap kerumitan dewasa muda bermasalah pembelajaran selain memberi mereka suatu ruang untuk advokasi diri dan advokasi kolektif dengan sokongan yang berkualiti dalam sistem sokongan mereka. Dari proses yang tidak diketahui kepada keyakinan pengetahuan dan pengalaman, kajian ini berharap membina hubungan di antara teori dan praktikal di mana kita dapat menikmati keamanan, keadilan, kesaksamaan semasa memahami kerumitan hidup untuk meyokong satu sama lain. Diharap penyertaan yang lebih luas akan membawa kepada pemahaman pengupayaan dan perwakilan simplistik dewasa muda bermasalah pembelajaran yang akan memberi impak yang berkesan terhadap pembinaan keamanan dan maksud kehidupan yang sebenar.

Kata kunci: advokasi diri, pendamaian rakan sebaya, penyelesaian konflik, masalah pembelajaran, kajian tindakan partisipatori

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **The Context of the Research**

The self-advocacy movement has developed internationally into a very influential position in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. Beginning in 1960s in Sweden, the self-advocacy movement has grown out of deinstitutionalization to the introduction of community care with the concept of normalization (Callus, 2013). It has given opportunities for young adults with learning disabilities to become visible in their action and voices when their lives are integrated into the communities (Flynn, Grant, & Ramcharan, 2010). Such a great impact has inevitably encouraged researchers and academia around the world to study its development (Caldwell, 2010; Callus, 2013; Gilmartin & Slevin, 2009; Goodley, 2000; Osamu, 2013; Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005). Analysing the academic reports and journals, Goodley (2000) was amongst the earliest literature documenting the lives of individuals with learning disabilities. This has impacted the self-advocacy movement in the United Kingdom in the 1980s following the development of the social model of disability where people with disabilities stood up for their rights (Chappell, Goodley, & Lawthom, 2001; World Health Organization & The World Bank, 2011). Narratives and actions of self-advocacy groups and their members were examined to provide the essential framework of self-advocacy. One of the greatest impacts was the choice of terminology being challenged by self-advocates in viewing themselves as individuals with equal rights in the society.

The self-advocacy impact reached its peak in 1982 when the promotion of self-advocacy of individuals with intellectual disabilities was well-recognised and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in the “World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons” in its article 29. It was stated:

*Mentally handicapped people are now beginning to demand a voice of their own and insisting on their right to take part in decision-making and discussion. Even those with limited communication skills have shown themselves able to express their point of view. In this respect, they have much to learn from the self-advocacy movement of persons with other disabilities. This development should be encouraged (p.25)*

Such recognition has made the effort of self-advocacy movements significant in the international arena, including the Asia Pacific region. Hence, self-advocacy groups continue to be formed and voices of individuals with learning disabilities are heard at different levels of local government meetings, international conferences and international high-level meetings in line with the ideology of creating an inclusive society for all (Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006; Tilley, 2013). The latest Global Report on the Right to Decide has asserted the ability of people with intellectual disabilities to make decisions and have control in their lives in accordance to Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Laurin-Bowie, 2014). The affirmation of recognition and respect for the legal capacity on an equal basis with others in all aspects of life for all individuals with disabilities is urged to be upheld in a holistic manner. As such, lives of individuals with learning disabilities are empowered with self-confidence and self-identity within a community (Llewellyn & Northway, 2008). The movement was further upheld by the adoption of our Government on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013-2022 in the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Person with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific (United Nations, 2012). The strategy has provided much avenue for the capacity building for persons with disabilities to track progress

towards improving the quality of life and the fulfillment of the rights of persons with disabilities in the region.

Moreover, it was debated among the intergovernment Expert Group Meeting that the genuine achievement of Millennium Development Goals required the inclusion of the rights, well-being, and the perspective of persons with disabilities in development efforts at all levels (Memoire, 2013). Such a notion has been discussed resulting in the reaffirmation at the 69<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly Plenary on 18 December 2014 for its members to go beyond the agenda for a more universal and inclusive agenda which should include the voice of people with disabilities in every member development agenda (United Nations, 2014). The need for capacity development efforts explicitly included empowering persons with disabilities as a new additional plenary action for its member states to continue their effort in the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) named the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 new global goals (Madans, Loeb & Eide, 2017). The 2030 Agenda is claimed to be a more universal and inclusive agenda for everyone and every country to play their part in developing and achieving a global vision (United Nations, 2015). Inevitably, these goals require much effort and participation from the local authority and community to be realized in its measurable indicators which included 11 explicit references to persons with disabilities. According to Greenwood (2017), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has highlighted the inclusion for people with disabilities in its action plan to achieve the statement of no one shall be left behind. With the challenges faced in achieving inclusion, this has opened more opportunity for the government to review their development plan and policy to include people with disabilities for inclusive change.

Statements and policy remain comprehensive on paper when the action plan is not being executed and monitored. Inclusive change could happen when people with disabilities are empowered and able to speak up for change. Unlike the birth of the self-advocacy movement in the western countries out of the issue of deinstitutionalization, the ideology of normalization and human rights led to self-advocacy being introduced in Malaysia in the early 1990s (Armstrong, 2002; United Voice, 2014). Based on the People First approach, a loose-knit social group in post-secondary level met up to form United Voice under the supervision of Dignity and Services, later to register officially as a society for and of persons with learning disabilities in 2005 (Yeo, 2007). Upholding the belief that people are their own best self-advocate, its mission is to empower and enable individuals with learning disabilities to contribute in an inclusive society through the self-advocacy movement (United Voice, 2014).

In United Voice, self-advocates gather monthly as committee members as leaders to discuss matters pertaining to the development of their organization, to understand issues of persons with learning disabilities including their members and to plan for meetings and activities for the members based on the members' voice. Typically, such meetings are supported by the support staff. Its right-based movement has impacted the community in birthing more self-advocacy groups so that these young people are trained to speak up and understand their rights as individuals. In other self-advocacy groups under the community service organisations, United Voice provides support by training the self-advocates to form committee and organise activities and meetings for their members. To date, United Voice is the only self-advocacy organization and about 60 self-advocacy groups have been formed throughout Malaysia (Maya, personal communication, January 9, 2015).

According to Maya, the formation of self-advocacy groups is still in process and progressing well with the support and funding from the Government. With its stable development for the past twelve years, self-advocates from United Voice have been well-recognised by the local government and international organisations as speakers and resource persons (Osamu, 2013). Moreover, being recognized as a pioneer society in the Asia-Pacific region, it is significant that self-advocacy has gained its stance and recognition in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities, their families and the community (Al-Yagon, et al., 2014; Chapman et al., 2011).

I have been involving with the self-advocacy development by supporting the self-advocates forming their group and running the activities of their group as a support staff in a service organization since the conception of the movement. When the self-advocates showed their leadership potential, they were given the opportunity to hold more responsibility, such as to be the committee members, elected by the members. They organized trainings and seminars to train their members to speak up and understand their roles and responsibilities. Ongoing support was provided by me after knowing their needs as a self-advocacy group to expand the movement. As I reflect on my role in being proactive in promoting self-advocacy and social inclusion for and with young adults with learning disabilities, tensions and dilemmas were noted in term of providing the level of support and type of approach should be given for their best choices. For instance, such tension occurs when their best choice goes against what I think best for them. Often, it ends up with prolonged time and effort for negotiation or termination of support.

Though self-advocacy has a strong intuitive ethical appeal, it involves tensions and dilemmas that have to be addressed and resolved for inclusive change. In those earlier days in the 1980s in the western culture, self-advocates took the

chance to negotiate their choices and rights with their service providers within the context of their given service (Aspis, 1997; Armstrong, 2002). However, such negotiation of choices and rights was hardly observed in our local context. Their life expectation was limited; their human rights were often denied when the autonomy depended on the goodwill of service providers. This challenged the route to gain real change in their life when self-advocacy was not liberated and supported by their service providers, parents and professionals (Flynn et al., 2010; Townson et al., 2007). These issues in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities are compounded by the environmental factors such as societal attitudes and conflict of interest with families and services during the fight to achieve self-advocacy.

According to Llewellyn and Northway (2008), this has caused confusion and barriers to achieving advocacy when the environment lacks confidence in individuals with learning disabilities. Chapman and Tilley (2013) explored the ethical underpinnings of self-advocacy support for intellectually disabled adults in UK and highlighted the critical needs of reciprocal relationships between self-advocates and their support workers. This relationship counts on both parties in facilitating mutual understanding and choice towards a greater collective autonomy among self-advocates where advocacy and self-determination of persons with learning disabilities are being promoted and practiced through self-advocacy (Sebag, 2010). The external environmental factor does play a critical part in the route to achieving self-advocacy.

A gap exists between the theoretical and the practical aspect of self-advocacy. Theoretically self-advocacy is seen to have become weakened by the 'pragmatic watering down of the underlying idealism of inclusion' associated with the 'escapism' of postmodern thinking about self-advocacy (Armstrong, 2002). Practically, self-

advocacy is seen as not engaging with the realities of life in individuals with learning disabilities. It is empirically noted that individuals with learning disabilities are being viewed as passive and dependent (Chapman & Tilley, 2013; Jingree & Finlay, 2013). Reflecting on the lives of young adults with learning disabilities, it is hard to identify an opportunity where they have a chance to make their own choices. In most cases, young adults with learning disabilities grow up in a 'protected' environment. The assumption is typically against their choices but towards the well-being of the individual. The inability to voice their opinions often implicates a controlled life without freedom and rights for independent and meaningful lives.

In the context of conflict resolution, there was no platform for them to speak up. Moreover, due to their special education needs, most of them were placed in early intervention programmes to improve their behaviour as they are at risk of becoming resistant to behavioural and social norms as well as achieve poor academic performance in the school system (Roberts & Griffin, 2009). Hence, their conflicts and behaviours are being arbitrated by school teachers, parents, service providers and professionals due to their social cognitive deficit and social conflict on top of their vulnerable sense of self and low self-esteem (Armstrong, 2002; Larkin, Jahoda, MacMahon, & Pert, 2012). Asserted by Sebag (2010), the effectiveness of behaviour management would not gain its impact if it is still being controlled by the educator as the sole author of the strategy. This means conflicts were resolved by an 'able' third party. Consequently, for the implication in the context of conflict resolution, individuals with learning disabilities have no platform to speak from unless within the context of self-advocacy and social inclusion where their rights are respected and voices are heard.

## **Rationale of the Study**

This study aimed at understanding the practicality of incorporating peer mediation for conflict resolution using self-advocacy skills by young adults with learning disabilities. Young adults with learning disabilities are the focus of the study as the intention is to bring out their sense of self to the extent of leadership skills underpinning the use of self-advocacy skills. The educational rationale is teaching and training them about self-advocacy and conflict resolution skills. I believe with the basis of self-advocacy skills being developed in them, they would be able to learn how to resolve conflicts constructively in a structured manner. Analysing the development of the self-advocacy movement in Malaysia, it is crucial to note the connection between self-advocacy and conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities as a work in progress (Pang, Loh & Ahmad Zabidi, 2016). The point is the development of the sense of self in young adults with learning disabilities is believed to be progressive in their life span towards adulthood. With the assumption and declaration of seeing young adults with learning disabilities take control of *all aspects of their life*, the use of self-advocacy in peer mediation for conflict resolution should be making its way in.

The implication for research and practice clearly demands the need to strengthen both skills in a progressive and structured manner for long-term development in achieving effective management and support in community living. This is clearly depicted in the 4<sup>th</sup> goal of Incheon Strategy of “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific which is to strengthen social protection (United Nations, 2012). Peer counselling was recommended as one of the targets in Goal 4. In this study, peer mediation is introduced as equivalent to a social protection service for young adults with learning disabilities to access. This goes in

line with the SDG's Goal 3, Goal 4 and Goal 11 in promoting well-being for all at all ages, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, and developing sustainable communities (United Nation, 2015). The argument is the requirement of a support system with sufficient coverage to realize their potential and capacity. This is proposed to be carried out through the emancipation of self to social empowerment when services and programmes are enhanced for them to live independently in the community.

Similarly, in realizing peer mediation for conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities, this support system needs to be developed in a wider perspective working with different stakeholders in a community. In this study, this includes the other young adults as their peers and the support staff within the same setting where conflict is expected to happen. It is a process of learning to develop young adults with learning disabilities as well as the community support system with the design and the objectives of this study. Hence, with enhanced self-advocacy skills in young adults with learning disabilities, I believe that conflicts can be resolved by them in a constructive and structured manner for the well-being of the individuals and the community.

Based on the ability of young adults with learning disabilities, focusing on those who have learned about self-advocacy and are active in practicing self-advocacy skills, they can and should be able to resolve conflicts among themselves constructively with strategies they have been taught (Armstrong, 2002; Flynn et al., 2010; Test et al., 2005). Moreover, with the issue of choice, young adults with learning disabilities should be given the opportunity to make choices on their own. In this study, this includes the disputants and mediators when the opportunity is in place for them to make their own choices. This means during conflicts between disputants,

they would be given opportunity to express their feelings about related issues whilst mediators listen and support disputants in resolving their conflicts. This implicates the possibility of their learning and solving their personal problems on top of handling the issues faced among their peers. The point is conflict is best resolved peacefully using self-advocacy skills and young adults with learning disabilities can be taught to handle it with proper guidance and support in their development and achievement.

Much research has been conducted on conflict resolution to be taught in the schools (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2005; Matloff & Smith, 1999; Palmer, 2000; Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson, 2002). The explicit teaching of conflict resolution remains absent for young adults with learning disabilities in the community especially in schools, vocational training settings and beyond. I believe learning is an on-going process. In most cases, based on what they have learned in schools, they are taught to express and talk to their respective supervisors in the case of unhappy events affecting themselves and conflicts with friends. It is noted that conflict is often perceived as a management issue rather than an opportunity for learning and development. Issues of conflict are mostly arbitrated by adults, who apply quick fix solutions. In such climates, young adults with learning disabilities learn how to flee, gain adult assistance or even fight their way out of a conflict but learn little about how to 'resolve' a conflict in a mutually satisfying manner (Sellman, 2009). Such scenario discourages young adults with learning disabilities from taking responsibility for their own behaviour (Leimdorfer, 1995). Hence, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunity should be provided in filling the gaps for young adults with learning disabilities, specifically beyond the school system as depicted in SDG's Goal 4 in achieving quality education (United Nation, 2015).

I am inevitably convicted and motivated to reflect on the current practices and approaches of behavior management among young adults with learning disabilities whilst instilling restorative justice and respecting them as persons in their own rights in Malaysian context (Cremin, Sellman, & McCluskey, 2012). By witnessing such scenario beyond the school environment, I believe that conflict is best resolved peacefully with the use of self-advocacy skills. My argument is that long-term and sustainable solution is the way forward. The self-advocacy movement is entrusted as the foundational and core approach in the quest for an effective strategy and practice in conflict management and leadership development skills. It aims to move forward as a sustainable conflict management towards restorative justice and management for young adults with learning disabilities. It is also my personal motivation in achieving social transformation in a community setting where young adults with learning disabilities can make a difference in the community.

Moreover, it is my personal traits of being a peacemaker produced by the teachings of biblical knowledge in school and church since I was young. Though there were damages in my personal encounters due to destructive management, I have learned not to repeat mistakes but to be more sensitive and attentive to an individual's well-being and holistic development. Forgiveness is the basis towards constructive management and restorative justice in any interpersonal conflict between one another. I believe it is a process of letting go of past hurts, accepting one's own brokenness towards peacemaking and embracing the meaning of life.

Relating self-advocacy to peer mediation and conflict resolution, believing in the potential and abilities of young adults with learning disabilities, I hope this research study will make connections between practice and theory, between academic institutions and the various groups within our communities, and also

between individuals' own histories and hopes (Flynn et al., 2010; Paris & Winn, 2014). It is regarded as a privilege to be the main researcher drawing my personal field experience as a social practitioner for the past eighteen years, to engage in the kind of research that can lead to a world where people can enjoy peace, justice, equality and the benefits of making their hopes and histories connect. We all need to listen to our personal experiences to understand the complexities, mysteries and wonders of learning, living, working and researching.

### **Statement of Problem**

It has been noted that there is a gap between the theoretical and practical aspects of self-advocacy skills in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities, particularly in relation to the experience of conflict and how it is managed. Conflict happens everywhere and is determined by many factors, including their personal experience and beliefs about themselves. Realistically, young adults with learning disabilities are not able to handle conflict though it is common to witness conflicts among themselves. To fully understand the meaning of conflict and how it affects their lives, it is critical to understand their beliefs and experiences of conflict.

From my past experiences of training young adults with learning disabilities beyond school age in Malaysia, I have observed the detrimental effects of being bullied in schools. Emotional stress, misunderstanding, conflict and aggression among young adults with learning disabilities persist with different behavioural outcomes within the same circumstances such as school bullying, peer rejection, misunderstanding and clashes of personality (Hutson, 2005). Some may be caused by exposure to conflict and violence in family and school. For instance, due to the damaging effects of school bullying, even though they have moved on from school, they carry with them the effects in the transitioning years. It becomes a ripple effect

of conflicts though in a different context and setting. Arguments and violence continues to build tension and conflicts, resulting in assaults and sometimes destructive outcomes such as aggressive behaviour towards each other (Bodtker, 2001; Larkin, Jahoda, & MacMahon, 2013). At times, they become the perpetrators, replicating what they have experienced.

Conflicts are also compounded by the lack of communicative opportunity, intolerable atmosphere, inability to express emotion and the lack of necessary skills to resolve situations among young adults with learning disabilities where arbitration by able-bodied persons happens. It is a complex and multi-layered issue. Due to their cognitive learning differences and limitations in expressing themselves, the process and outcomes of conflict are resolved by a third party, commonly able-bodied, which includes service providers like the support staff, supporting friends and parents (Boylan & Ing, 2005; Campbell, 2007; Costello, Bouras, & Davis, 2007). Based on my personal observation, some centres have installed closed-circuit television to ensure that conflicts are resolved as fairly as possible whilst others are based on the observation and questioning by the staff. There is limited opportunity for expression of misunderstanding and conflict. Often, stigma, fear and communication challenges are the obstacles for them to seek and gain any help or support in overcoming their problem and conflict.

When young adults with learning disabilities are being arbitrated in their conduct and behaviour, there is no opportunity for them to express their views. On the other hand, managing conflict appeared to be challenging due to the multi-layered issue as they are commonly viewed as 'problems' (Flynn et al., 2010; Shaw, 2009). Punishment and sanction may be imposed on either one party or both. This deprives them of the opportunity to enhance their self-advocacy skills with the

process of listening to their voices. Suspension is the most common consequence executed for the welfare of other members, after warning has been given by the person-in-charge in the training centre or representatives from their family members (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Hence, the issue of depression and hopelessness continues in adulthood, and it was concluded that these young adults appeared to exhibit self-harming behaviours in solving their problem (Rees & Langdon, 2016). Described by Vehmas and Watson (2014), their life would be oppressed when the circumstances deprive them from going nowhere. Fyson and Fox (2014) termed it as ongoing barriers to social inclusion for individuals with learning disabilities to achieve active participation in the community.

I began to make observations by taking down field notes to verify the frequency of conflicts among the young adults and making my own reflection about the conflicts which happened in the incidents recorded below. Typically in a five-day work week in the employment training centre, there are at least three to five times of conflicts happening. This depends on the attendance of different members in the training centre. Below are some excerpts of my observation field notes.

#### Incident 1:

*One day, during work training, there was a conflict about the materials taken by a member, which began to turn into an argument over the ownership of the materials. As practitioner, I started to intervene to minimize the conflict. But as researcher, I decided to observe and write while they were arguing. The arguing took some time to subside when one party decided to give in (Fieldnote:9/10/14)*

#### Incident 2:

*A post by a colleague on facebook: "A member out of anger from quarrelling with another member went to 88Mart & cut 20 packets of oil...Yeap, another day at work..."*

*The first word which struck me was 'out of anger from quarrelling'. How does she quarrel? What was the quarrel about? Who was the quarrel with? What was the action taken against her?*

*I went back to the office and searched for more details about the quarrel. I found the answer for my questions...*

*Action taken: She was suspended for one month. Her mother was called to settle the bill with the Mart. Her mother apologised for her daughter's 'wrong' action.*

*She quarrel with KC. KC admitted it. He had shouted at her. Hence, she was angry. She reached the point of rage where she didn't know what she was doing.*

*What could be the reason for doing so? Was she really angry? What was the trigger?*

*Could the incident have been prevented if there was peer mediation in the centre where they have a place/someone to talk to when there is conflict?*

*Anger management classes were conducted for her. Does it mean that she could not understand and does not know how to apply what she has learned? How could these courses and skills taught to them be relevant and applicable to them? It is hard, it is hard work... does this mean strategy needs to be change? Did anger management classes not make its impact on them? What is the best practice for them to resolve conflicts? (Fieldnote: 13/11/2014)*

Reflecting on my notes often has different implications, of which I realized I was emphasizing a lot on conflict in the beginning and the frustration of the parties involved. Hence, immediate action was taken without much hesitation for the welfare and safety of others. This focus has taken priority over my observations into my lens as researcher. At the same time, I noted conflict within my role as a practitioner when I became disappointed with conflicts due to diverse personalities. This has challenged me to start focusing on resolution rather than conflict and start thinking of the best way to resolve it.

The change of focus was an eye-opener. The importance of implementing an approach to problem solving became increasingly evident. I found that most young adults with learning disabilities did not know how to handle conflicts. They have been taught to report to a supervisor and conflicts are being resolved. When asked about the reason for their reaction during conflicts, practically most of them found it hard to bring up the issue and rather kept it to themselves. It may be due to the

approach taken by the supervisor who was ineffective as some reported “they did nothing” (Ahmad, personal communication, September 30, 2014). I wondered how peer mediation can be implemented so that they are able to resolve conflicts by themselves. With self-advocacy skills, they were taught to defend their rights not to be disturbed and bullied, but they reported “I reminded him, but he didn’t stop”. The ability to self-advocate is woven with the lost sense of self in themselves. Once again, this clearly indicates the critical need for a structured and constructive manner in managing conflicts among young adults with learning disabilities.

It is observed that young adults with learning disabilities do not handle conflicts though their understanding of what conflict is based on their experience and knowledge. An informal focus group discussion was conducted with eight young adults with learning disabilities to verify the research evidence in a training centre (Eric, John, Boon, Lily, Wim, Ray, Golun and May, personal communication, September 18, 2014). They perceived conflict as ‘quarrelling, bullying, arguing, stealing, cheating, war, problems, stress, fighting, anger, fear and stress’. Some arrived at these term based on their personal experience whilst some were taught. From the informal focus group discussion, it is gathered that they have a fair understanding about what conflict is, and it was undeniably agreed that conflict is resolved by their accompanying adults and service providers.

Nancy, a self-advocate working at a workplace for young adults with learning disabilities in Petaling Jaya identified her experience in handling some conflicts among members in her workplace. The types of conflicts she identified from the given conflict cartoons were fights, arguing and name-calling (Nancy, personal communication, October 27, 2014). Moreover, in most service centres and vocational training centres which have personnel trained in self-advocacy skills,

conflicts among them require a third person of authority to resolve them. This was verified by another self-advocate in a workplace in Penang, Ahmad, where the staff-in-charge is needed to resolve conflicts which happened in the workplace with misunderstandings and quarrels amongst the workers (Ahmad, personal communication, September 20, 2014). There was no knowledge and experience on how the self-advocates could resolve their conflicts happened amongst themselves.

Typically, behaviour management strategies used during the young adult's younger years continue to be pursued because their behaviour has been the focus of interventions (Bodtger, 2001). For example, Applied Behaviour Analysis is among the most common strategy in dealing with individuals with learning disabilities in Malaysia. This refers to the practice of reducing bad behaviour by using negative reinforcement or rewarding good behaviour with a rewards system by using observation to define and measure behaviour (Farrell, 2009). The effectiveness of this strategy in removing inappropriate behaviours in these young adults has caused them to be static in their learning and passive in their action. The point is it is not person-centred and there is no opportunity for these individuals with learning disabilities to speak their mind about their experience when their behaviour was being controlled.

Research conducted has shown the controlled life of young adults with learning disabilities which has caused much adverse effect to the community resource system (Fish, 2016; Williams & Porter, 2017). The aftermath continues in their young adulthood when conflicts happen among the young adults with learning disabilities in a vicious cycle. Moreover, the destructive characteristics outcomes of conflict did not improve the situation when conflict was managed without impartially in a punitive approach such as suspension. The cyclic conflict pattern reoccurred in

them after their suspension period ended, and this has caused damage to their self-image and emotional state of stability. I wondered “What would have happened if these young adults had been trained with self-advocacy skills from young in a dynamic manner, and how would they have envisioned the choices made for them, and by them?” There might be argument and disagreement throughout the learning years, aren’t they for the good of self-development in the journey to becoming resilient? Arguing from this perspective, self-advocacy is essential for these young adults to be resilient in managing their daily challenges.

All these observations and points highlight the need for constructive conflict resolution education and training in an inclusive and equitable quality education beyond the school system (United Nation, 2015). In this study, peer mediation is suggested as the next possible initiative. Peer mediation enables the voices of young adults to be heard, rather than suppressed and marginalized, in contrast with authoritarian and behaviourist methods of discipline (Cremin, 2007). Unfortunately, there is a paucity in the literature in the implementation of peer mediation in elementary schools for safer school policies and conflict resolution for special needs population in United Kingdom and United States of America (Bickmore, 2011; Bodtker, 2001; Cremin, 2007; Flecknoe, 2005; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Acikgoz, 2001; Jones & Bodtker, 1999).

Even though there are a number of writings on peer mediation for the youth and community in general, there are very few mentioned on young adults with learning disabilities (Hessler, Hollis, & Crowe, 1998; Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson, 2002). This implicates a critical need for more studies on young adults with learning disabilities using self-advocacy skills to explore the impact of peer mediation on the lives of these young people as they transition into adulthood, in the

process of achieving self-advocacy and independence (Armstrong, 2002). In the recent research conducted by Monteleone and Forrester-Jone (2017) in exploring the meaning and experience of disability among adults with intellectual disabilities, it is concluded that participants clearly experienced feelings of difference despite a lack of articulation. This has impacted their self-esteem for person-centred actions and political movement.

Moreover, the post-conflict experiences from the schools leading to these behavioural issues have created an avenue to mental health risks in today's youth including young adults with learning disabilities who are always perceived to be the 'problem' in this context (Bradshaw, Nguyen, Kane, & Bass, 2014). According to Sebag (2010), the element of self-advocacy in behaviour management brings forth its success for personal development towards success in their individual educational programme and transition planning in which the impact of post-conflict in their interpersonal relationship was overlooked. The dilemma often occurs in viewing young adults with learning disabilities as a rightful citizen with potential and self-worth or with a need to be controlled as an individual (Fish, 2016; Fyson & Cromby, 2013; Shaw, 2009). The underpinning principle of long-term well-being of the individual has been overlooked, especially when conflict needs to be handled. Eliminating conflict is impossible but preventing it from escalating would be one of the strategies to reduce conflict and give opportunity for young adults with learning disabilities to deal with it in a constructive manner. It is without doubt that studies in peer mediation are useful and should be the next initiative.

Maya, from a local self-advocacy organization has been actively involved with the promotion of self-advocacy movement by setting up self-advocacy groups in Malaysia under the project funded by Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga

dan Masyarakat (*Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development*), confirmed that conflicts among young adults with learning disabilities are still being handled by staff-in-charge in the centre and parents in the family. The competency of the staff in handling the conflict is very critical in its resolution. It has never been considered that young adults with learning disabilities can resolve conflicts among themselves. It is a paradigm shift for today's practitioners to acknowledge the possibility of such ideology in its implication for practice. She believes that with the foundation of self-advocacy training, with proper training and a well-developed curriculum, such a possibility can be realized (Maya, personal communication, October 27, 2014). Nancy upholds this belief with her ten years of working experience with young adults with learning disabilities where she has found some confidence in handling conflicts within her capacity. She acknowledges the need to be equipped with much training to handle conflicts among others (Nancy, personal communication, October 27, 2014).

Reflecting on the development and movement of self-advocacy and, witnessing the positive impact of self-advocacy on the lives of young adults with learning disabilities, what is the implication for the next level of development for self-advocacy? Are self-advocates able to handle conflicts among themselves using peer mediation when they are able to make choices and do things differently? How can peer mediation make a difference in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities? Is peer mediation a more sustainable approach for conflict resolution? What are the effects of peer mediation on self-advocacy skills in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities? These questions are explored and discussed throughout the research process in this study.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore the possibility of peer mediation programme by young adults with learning disabilities based on the use of self-advocacy skills. This involves my attempt to understand how peer mediation works within the context of the variables at the community level with the young adults. The programme was 'acted' out with them in training where the process of action research took place. Action research is used for this purpose as a way to seek understanding and gain insight into the processes at work; to observe and note which aspects of the strategy are effective and practical and which are not, subsequently making changes based on the understanding, through a continuous process of acting and reflecting with the young adults with learning disabilities who are the main actors in the process. The action and reflection involving young adults with learning disabilities aims to explore the feasibility of their potential underpinning self-advocacy skills.

Action research has been conducted in various professional fields such as health care practices and education fields, including peer mediation in Northern Ireland in universities as well as international conferences, books, journals, and recently in the World Health Report which has been acknowledged as a paradigm shift in disability research (Cremin, 2007; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). This has enabled both researchers and practitioners to improve strategy professionally and enhance the science of education. The process of action research is deliberately discussed in Chapter Three. The role of peer mediators is explored as the focus of the training programme based on self-advocacy skills towards research skills. This includes a range of self-understanding of inter-personal relationships, problem-solving skills and the needs for understanding and supporting one another in a wider context.

Attitudes of respect and equality are developed and maintained throughout the process of training.

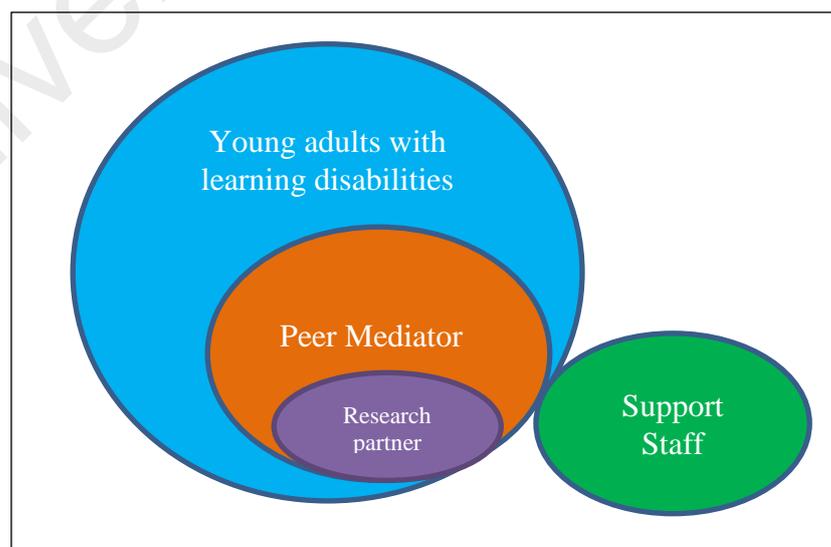
### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to develop and train peer mediators who would be able to manage conflicts at their best capacity and understanding based on the model of self-advocacy, peer mediation and conflict resolution. By emphasizing on the model of self-advocacy which includes communication and leadership skills, they would learn to respect one another in the process of resolving conflicts among themselves as a step to enhance self-advocacy skills despite knowledge of self and knowledge of rights (Test et al., 2005). Based on the outline of an action research by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), this study consists of three cycles with its research questions to achieve the objectives in each cycle to improve learning and practice. This study's practice-based and change-oriented objectives make action research a natural methodological choice. It is intended to encompass concerns of both theory and practice, engaging both the researcher and the affected population directly in the midst of the phenomena being studied. The basic element of the action research approach is captured in a definition by Rapoport (1970):

*Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually accepted ethical framework. To the aims of contributing to the practice concerns of people and to the goals of social science, we add a third aim, to develop the self-help competencies of people facing problems (p.499).*

The nature of action research is built around integrated cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection with gradual participation from the peer mediators. The findings of each cycle influenced the design of the next cycle as an evolving process rather than a one-time event (Stringer, 1999). Planning took place where the

purposes of study were shared with an identified participating organization in Selangor. Based on Figure 1.1, the actors of this study consisted of young adults with learning disabilities as research participants, young adults with learning disabilities as peer mediators and possible research partners, and the support staff. Young adults with learning disabilities as the peer mediators are the main actors of the study. They were identified and recommended by the support staff from the organization in the planning stage before the commencement of Cycle One. Young adults with learning disabilities as research partners would be developed from the peer mediators based on their readiness and willingness to learn about research skills and take on more responsibilities after learning about peer mediation. Other young adults with learning disabilities served their roles as other actors when conflicts happened. The support staff in the organization acted as the supporting actors and observers whilst I acted as the main researcher and facilitator for the trainings. Involving other young adults and the support staff as a group in the cycle was intended to begin the process of triangulation in this study.



*Figure 1.1.* Actors of the study

Three objectives were planned based on the actors in the study:

1. To explore the understanding of young adults with learning disabilities concerning the roles of peer mediators;
2. To examine the ability of peer mediators in resolving conflicts among young adults with learning disabilities and other involving individuals; and
3. To explore how self-advocacy in peer mediation can play its roles in conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities.

Rigorous observation took its position in the process of training in the real setting for data collection and data analysis subsequently so that knowledge and practice would be transferable and useful for other users in different settings (Paris & Winn, 2014). Data collection included observation, interviews, documents and records such as peer mediation log sheets and peer mediator's diary with the actors to end Cycle 1 with reflection and evaluation. Based on the evaluation notes and critical comments upon discussion and review meetings in Cycle 1, a revised training programme was planned and conducted based on the practical needs from the actors to commence Cycle 2 with the same objectives set. This revised training programme included drafting peer mediation visual scripts which can be used by peer mediators specifically, and more in-depth experiential activities to improve peer mediation skills. Revision of the training programme and the visual scripts were critical at this stage before the commencement of Cycle 3 where peer mediators increased the usage of the materials in practicing peer mediation and decreased the support from the support staff. It was hard to foresee the content of Cycle 3 as the intention to involve young adults with learning disabilities to contribute their insights for improvement of practice was yet to happen in Cycle 1. As more learning and participation of the peer mediators took place in Cycle 2, the possibility of them taking the role of research

partners became evident upon their agreement. Cycle 3 marked the end for the purpose of this study even though the cycle should continue with progressive reflection and evaluation to improve the practice.

With the experience gained from practice, the research environment became more empowered and positive. Hence, though the role of the researcher and programme facilitator was intentional, it was made clear not to impose change on people and their ways, but to encourage change from within where young adults with learning disabilities are influenced to live responsibly using self-advocacy skills from emancipation of self to social empowerment through their participation. As mentioned earlier, the objectives of the study evolved with the participation of peer mediators as research partners in Cycle 3 when they learned to be more confident. Such process is described by Herr and Anderson (2015) as ‘a sense of unearthing’, typically happened to action researchers when the cycles of research illuminate the issues being studied with new literature and new questions for study. This leads researchers to read in direction they had not anticipated. In this study, the peer mediators have gained skills and learned to be confident and take charge of their role as peer mediators and research partners. This leads the study to aim for the fourth objective with an apparent practical knowledge:

4. To explore the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation for young adults with learning disabilities who had participated as research partners.

This sets the momentum for peer mediators to be included in this study as research partners at their capacity in Cycle 3. The participation of research partners in this study has added new insights from the initial research objectives, but with the same learning aim for self-emancipation and social empowerment.

## Research Questions

Based on the rationale of the study, the statement of problem and the objectives of the study, the research questions are formulated underpinning the three cycles of Action Research in a systematic enquiry to achieve the learning outcome of peer mediation for conflict resolution:

1. To what extent do young adults with learning disabilities understand the roles of peer mediators?
2. To what extent are peer mediators able to resolve conflicts among young adults with learning disabilities and other involving individuals?
3. How can self-advocacy in peer mediation play its roles in conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities?

The implication of the research questions is to achieve the intention to generate knowledge of practice for personal and social well-being of young adults with learning disabilities. The course of the research is expected to entail the decisions made along the way which has provided avenue for critical reflection upon what is learned along the way whilst developing the capability for thoughtful research. It is important to note that these initial research questions are formed and serve as a device for presenting an overview of the research where the notion of listening to the 'voices' of young adults with learning disabilities might bring about some changes in lieu of the later research questions when the participatory action is taking its position and stance with the power of difference (Woelders, Abma, Visser & Schipper, 2015). Hence the fourth research question is formed as:

4. What is the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation for young adults with learning disabilities who had participated as research partners?

The intentional action asserted by McNiff and Whitehead (2009) depicts transformational processes of generating questions that open up new possibilities. I believe that each step of the way contains new possibilities, particularly in the setting of educational intent by and for young adults with learning disabilities and its environment. This includes a new learning paradigm shift in the research agenda in the formation of research questions for this study.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is significant to young adults with learning disabilities, specifically the self-advocates, where they would learn to handle conflict among themselves and/or with other involving individuals in a constructive manner. My field experience in the community has given me background insight and appreciation into how to relate to them and to expect a commitment from them to participate in a research process about their own learning curve. It is based on the model of self-advocacy in showcasing the ability and potential of young adults with learning disabilities in relation to the research questions (Aspis, 1997; Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2005; Test et al., 2005). I believe the formation of self-advocacy groups without fulfilling the real meaning of self-advocacy in a sustainable social development defeats its purpose in its implication for practice. Self-advocacy encompasses the opportunities to develop and enhance the holistic development of young adults with learning disabilities as a person. Confidence is presumed to be gained in inter-personal relationships with one another. This confidence should be sustained to impact the community when conflict happens. In this manner, self-advocates are entrusted with a greater sense of social responsibility in handling conflicts among themselves and/or with other involving individuals. Hence, the use of self-advocacy in peer mediation for conflict resolution is believed to expound the

civic values in young adults with learning disabilities. I believe it is a way forward for a sustainable development of the individuals as well as the community which includes the parents, families, relevant civil organisations and government agencies.

If peer mediation is the way forward for conflict resolution by the self-advocates and other young adults with learning disabilities, all sectors in the community, including the family system and the Government should seriously consider working together in developing a system which provides the opportunity for them to practice their ability and confidence. This includes conscious and intentional effort in empowering them to contribute to their civic roles in the society as stated in SDG's Goal 5 for gender equality (United Nation, 2015). Young adults with learning disabilities, even with their limitation and differences as what we perceived, should be respected in making their own choices and decisions, taking risks and taking the lead in accordance to their capacity and responsibility. The process of developing mutual support by the aftermath of conflict resolution shall add value to the significance of the study in term of contributing to the development of civic values and responsibilities of citizenship.

On the other hand, the participatory action research by young adults with learning disabilities in Cycle 3 has contributed to the significance of the study in definite term. The involvement and contribution of young adults with learning disabilities are expected to add value to this study in highlighting their ability and potential besides empowering, transforming and emancipating these young adults from situations that constrain their self-development and self-determination (Karlsson & Nilholm, 2006). Karlsson and Nilholm highlighted the importance of being flexible to adjust to the needs of service users where the user control of services is increased with combination of individual support. Such opportunity

should provide space for them to grow with greater empowerment and greater experience of self-determination over the prejudice and oppression in their lives (Carr, Darke & Kuno, 2008; Goodley, 1997). I believe, in Malaysia, there is still much concerted effort needed in this area of development in relating self-advocacy to participatory action research with a sense of identity for young adults with learning disabilities, which might go beyond the individual context from this study.

### **Operational Definitions**

**Self-Advocacy** is a term defined by many scholars, when the movement began in 1960s, as 'speaking up' for oneself with the elements of self-determination, self-awareness, and knowledge of human rights (Test, et al., 2005; Wehmeyer, 1992). Test et al. (2005) have developed a model of self-advocacy based on literature and analysis on self-advocacy movements since the 1970s. It is divided into four components, knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communications, and leadership from the individual perspective to a collective movement. Knowledge of self consists of their preferences, interests, learning styles and knowing their own disabilities. Knowledge of rights includes knowing their own personal and community rights. These two components of knowledge relate to communications which compose of how their knowledge is being conveyed to another party involved in an understandable manner. Leadership skills link with knowledge of group's rights where young adults with learning disabilities are able to form team dynamics and execute their roles as a group. This model allows all stakeholders to support and improve the movement and quality of self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy is extended in its development as a social change movement where people with learning disabilities are empowered and confident to speak for themselves, make their own decisions, and stand up for their rights, both individually

and collectively underpinning the value of independence (Flynn et al., 2010; Talbot, Astbury & Mason, 2010). It ‘strives to create opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to speak on their own behalf’ as an individual and in collective effort (Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006; Callus, 2013). It is pointed out by Callus that the ability and effectiveness to self-advocate are affected by two aspects, a sense of identity when they perceive themselves to be common to other people, and a sense of affiliation to a specific group where they support one another, particularly other self-advocates who have challenges in speech and communication. In the prospect of individuals with learning disabilities, self-advocacy offers them an avenue to offer and share their skills as part of the community in the People First Movement (Flynn et al., 2010).

In this study, the term ‘self-advocacy’ suggests that young adults with learning disabilities speak up on their own particularly on their needs and issues, in respect to knowledge of self and knowledge of rights. The element of communications is explicit when young adults with learning disabilities are given the opportunity to express their needs irrespective of their level of cognitive understanding. Leadership skills will be prominent when a group of young adults with learning disabilities share their skills and resources in advocating and supporting one another. The notion of speaking on their own behalf implies the subsided responsibility of other people around them where the ability of young adults with learning disabilities are acknowledged and supported by the community.

**Peer Mediation** is step by step instructions to manage conflicts in a constructive manner. Created from community mediation programmes, its effectiveness was replicated in school settings. It is an intervention into a dispute or negotiation by an acceptable, impartial and neutral third party who has no authoritative decision-

making power, to assist disputing parties in voluntarily reaching their own mutually acceptable settlement of issues in dispute (Guanci, 2002; Hessler, Hollis & Crowe, 1998). In the school setting, children are trained to manage conflicts to help protagonists to discuss their needs and feelings in achieving peaceful solutions amidst their differences (Flecknoe, 2005). Cremin (2007) describes it as a form of dispute resolution conducted by the peers typically with the emphasis on student empowerment, social and affective skills for life. There are different settings and approaches in its programme and practices by different regions of the world. Generally, peer mediation is “motivated by strong personal convictions, and seeks to enable and empower citizens to resolve their own disputes in ways that would strengthen communities, and enable individuals to live more satisfying lives” underpinning a philosophy of non-violence and peace education (Cremin, 2007).

In this study, peer mediation takes place where two young adults with learning disabilities, the peer mediators, manage conflicts between two disputants with learning disabilities, as their peers, and/or other involving individuals within the setting such as the support staff, to achieve a peaceful solution amidst their differences and misunderstanding. The elements of peer mediation involve the value of facilitation, active listening, empathy, cooperation and empowerment as a process within the peer mediators in achieving constructive resolution between disputants. These elements complement the elements of communications in the model of self-advocacy. The possibility of peer mediation to include other involving individuals in the setting is expected to take place within the ability of peer mediators.

**Conflict Resolution** is the approach in which a conflict is being handled and solved. Conflict ‘involves struggles between two or more people over values, or competition for status, power and scarce resources’ (Stewart, 1998). There are many settings for

conflict which include family, school, and workplace in local and global context. By and large, conflict involves interpersonal, intergroup, and international entities with various causes and processes in its own life cycle. Conflict is necessary at times for change to occur but it does not imply the eradication of conflict such as aggression and violence (Hessler et al., 1998). According to Guanci (2002), types of conflicts commonly being mediated in middle-school include rumors, name calling, teasing, pushing/shoving, harassment, threats, intimidation, bullying, property issues, cliques, fighting (verbal and physical), boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, teacher/student relationships, friendship and other issues of prejudice.

In special needs population, Jones and Bodtker (1999) describe conflicts in the form of verbally and physically aggressive behaviours as destructive conflicts in her study. There is not much difference in Bodtker's (2001) study on conflicts education in her association with students with severe emotional disabilities, learning disabilities, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder where conflicts are related as verbally aggressive behaviour, and physical aggression. Hence, it is noted that aggression and violence are commonly related to conflict for young adults with learning disabilities (Kerr, 2013).

Conflict specifically refers to interpersonal disputes among young adults with learning disabilities conceived from their friendship which has its meaning in each individual (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2014; McVilly, Stancliffe, Parmenter, & Burton - Smith, 2006). When friendship is significant in a person's life, conflicts is common on the other hand. It ranges from a clash between opposing beliefs with unrealized goals and ideas to an actual physical clash with a feeling of frustration, hatred and violence over the goals of preserving and destroying (Galtung, 2000). For instance, name-calling, disagreement over an assigned task and inappropriate

physical behaviour by another person are among the common conflicts happened in their setting. However, as conflict has its negativism value, limited literature and research on conflict are noted as a literature gap (Rohwerder, 2013). As noted earlier, conflicts among young adults with learning disabilities commonly relate to aggression and violence in most literature. Their low self-esteem and high risk of being victims of bullying and disruptive behaviours (Dobmeier & Moran, 2008) have been the main concern in their transitioning years as young adults. Hence, a third party would intervene for conflicts among them due to their 'disability'. It is unlikely that young adults with learning disabilities have the opportunity to resolve conflict. However, it is noted that sometimes conflicts would end on their own when one of the conflicted parties choose to let go and move on.

In this study, conflicts consist of the different types of conflicts which happen in a cycle as a process and/or in a context in relation to young adults with learning disabilities and/or with other involving individuals. Commonly, it is viewed as escalating conflicts and de-escalating conflicts in the conflict cycle with its history and action. Depending on their styles of coping, conflict is managed by a third party to achieve peaceful resolution.

**Young Adults with Learning Disabilities** cover a broad spectrum of learning disabilities which includes very mild, mild, moderate and severe learning disabilities based on IQ tests and other social adaptive behaviour tests by professionals (Callus, 2013). In DSM-5, the neurodevelopmental disorders referred as a group of conditions with onset in the developmental period which produces impairments of personal, social, academic, or occupational functioning (Kupfer & Regier, 2013). However, learning disabilities sometimes may be referred to as 'learning difficulties', 'intellectual disabilities' or 'developmental disabilities' by different countries and

authors according to its usage by them. For example, in the UK, many self-advocacy group members prefer the term ‘learning difficulty’ with the conviction that learning support needs change over time (Callus, 2013; Flynn et al., 2010; Goodley, 2000). Buttner and Hasselhorn (2011) defined learning disabilities (LD) from the educational perspective as;

*Students with difficulties in specific cognitive processes and academic achievement with otherwise normal levels of intellectual functioning...Accordingly, ICD-10 and DSM-IV describe LDs as a poor academic achievement that cannot be explained by intelligence or external factors (p.75).*

According to Tannock (2013), the clinical concern on DSM-IV has impacted the developmental changes in DSM-5. For instance, the ‘clustering of three DSM-IV categories into one category to identify the current manifestations of the neurodevelopmental disorders; expanding the current psychometrically based diagnostic criteria to include clinical history and observation of learning problems, as well as test scores’ (Kupfer & Regier, 2013). The notion of the developmental changes has given avenue for diagnosis to be conducted in a more holistic manner in DSM-5. However, a more comprehensive cross-sectional and longitudinal evaluation in large clinical, community, and epidemiological samples of children, adolescents, and adults is yet to be verified with much needed in-depth research and study reports (Al-Yagon et al., 2014).

In Malaysia, ‘persons with disabilities’ is defined in the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Malaysia, 2008). Categorization of persons with disabilities is under the prerogative of the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia. Under the new guideline for registration effective 2012 (Malaysia, Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2016), ‘persons with learning disabilities’ is defined as those who are having problems with their cognitive development and biological age in Category V. It

encompasses individuals who have Global Developmental Delay, Down Syndrome, other related intellectual disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Specific Learning Difficulties such as Dyslexia, Dyscalculia and Dysgraphia. This group of conditions resembles the neurodevelopmental disorders in DSM-5. However, it is noted that the issues of classification, definition and identification of learning disabilities remain unresolved and debatable globally and locally (Buttner & Hasselhorn, 2011).

The construction of learning disabilities can be argued from different perspectives such as the bio-medical approach, or the socio-cultural approach beyond educational perspective as stated above. It can be a complicated argument to derive a definite term if we are to view each individual as a person with his or her biological, social and emotional aspects within a socio-cultural perspective. In Malaysia, our young adults prefer to be termed as having 'learning disabilities' as most of them acknowledge their learning disability and their capacity in need for support in their lives (Yeo, 2007). I believe the different definitions in different local contexts are for the purpose of being more systematic in its management and for the provision of better service for the target groups.

In this study, young adults with learning disabilities mainly focus on those who have problems in learning associated with disabilities since young. They are registered with the government under Category V of persons with disabilities. Their ages range from 20 to 55 as the focus of this study is on young adults who have left their school at the age of 19. Often, their potential is hidden and they are a group most misjudged, misunderstood and neglected in the community. The typology and severity of learning disabilities is not the focus in identifying these individuals in the study but they are included as who they are. I believe in seeing their potential and

abilities on top of looking at ways in which the environment they live in have added to their difficulties at some point in their life.

### **Summary**

From the context of the self-advocacy movement, it is fair to note the challenge of its development associated with both individual and collective efforts which overlap at most times with the notion of power towards reclaiming voice, power and identity for young adults with learning disabilities. The development of self-advocacy in the local context has grown from being led by practitioners to having their own say over time, which should include resolving their own conflicts as the next possible development individually as a self-advocate and collectively as an identity. However, there remain some questions and challenges about whose voice is being heard, at the expense of whom and representing which interests (Flynn et al., 2010; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2014). The objectives of this study shall prove the relevance in helping and supporting these young adults to claim their own voice through peer mediation and conflict resolution, prior to becoming an independent voice in view to have a voice heard in unison with others with whom interests are shared. It is about progressively positioning their power to, with, and for the people themselves.

Chapter Two further discusses the related literatures and theories in forming a theoretical framework and conceptual framework for the study. Models and past research on self-advocacy, peer mediation and conflict resolution for young adults with learning disabilities specifically are explored and reviewed whilst exploring the possibility for the most practical conflict resolution approach to be applied by young adults with learning disabilities in achieving the objectives of the study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature that provides the foundation for this study. The review of related theories involves the Critical Theory, Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory which are to provide a theoretical framework for the study. The selection of these theories is based on the historical oppression and injustice in the society in relation to the lives of young adults with learning disabilities as human beings and as a collective body. It is followed by models of self-advocacy in peer mediation towards conflict resolution as a process and part of the development of the life of young adults with learning disabilities in its life span. The model of self-advocacy provides the underpinning approach in extending its relationship in peer mediation which has overlapped identified factors as a parallel approach. This aims to achieve the outcome of conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities.

Several literatures were reviewed to identify gaps and limitations in services for and of young adults with learning disabilities in the community. Findings from past research in regards to self-advocacy in a larger context, the implementation of peer mediation in the schools, and a few researchers for special needs population are discussed. Moreover, the relevance of conflict resolution and conflict management in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities is discussed. Review of past research has provided a thorough knowledge to identify the gap between literature and practical implementation. Subsequently, the review should enhance the

knowledge base and practical development of peer mediation and conflict resolution to take its position by and for young adults with learning disabilities in relation to the conceptual framework for this study.

### **Review of Related Theories**

The selection of a theoretical approach from a number of alternatives within the social sciences is reviewed in the following session to guide the study. Critical Theory, Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory are discussed in relation to this study after reviewing related literatures on the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. It is essential to note the oppression and injustice in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities which is often overlooked by the society. These theories serve as rationale for us to re-think and be critical about the quality of life and potential of young adults with learning disabilities.

#### **Critical Theory**

*Conflict is the essential core of a free and open society (Alinsky, 1971, p.12)*

Critical Theory has been widely practiced in many professional fields including the social sciences, teaching, legal and social work professions with its proven wisdom. It has provided the basis to develop critical ideas and analytical thinking skills among these professions where social justice faced by the clientele was the main agenda. The field of conflict resolution and practitioners has also benefitted in improving the lives of oppressed people during their social conflicts management (Hansen, 2008). This relates closely with the oppressive lives of individuals with learning disabilities which need to be reviewed critically.

Critical Theory became prominent in the mid-1800s due to the depressive treatment by the upper class which in turn caused radical activity by the lower classes. The unjust social structures have birthed many theorists such as the constructivists, Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire. Freire (1997) believes that education to the oppressed based on dialogue and self-discovery would achieve social justice and equality based on his work experience with the poor. According to Freire, to support the marginalized to achieve their hopes for social justice and equality, critical consciousness is developed through education for their understanding of structural obstacles towards attaining their societal goals. Critical Theory is formed and Hansen (2008) in his articles asserts the relevance of Critical Theory for conflict resolution to overcome societal and interpersonal oppression and injustice. Such societal oppression is affecting the whole system in the society between the oppressors and the oppressed. This has awakened the essence of social justice and the principal goal of critical work in the social structure where equality of opportunity, services, resources and meaningful participation in decision making should be promoted for all people (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Hence, based on the framework of Critical Theory, transformation is believed to take place within the exploited societal relationships and create a more equitable society.

The argument is the relationship between Critical Theory and self-advocacy in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. The notion of young adults with learning disabilities being objectified since young by their parents, opportunities being denied in many ways have inevitably indicated the “critical consciousness” to generate social change (Algood, Harris, & Hong, 2013; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Freire (1997) describes the notion of preventing the voices of the oppressed from entering the societal discourse as a form of violence and it must be overcome in order

to create and maintain a just society. Recognising such oppressive obstacles should make way for equal opportunity and social inclusion to happen in the life of young adults with learning disabilities. Inevitably, this calls for the critical needs to educate and share our knowledge and resources with these young adults with learning disabilities with the concept of equal opportunity when their voices are heard.

In the dilemma of viewing the young adults with learning disabilities as an individual with their own rights and individual who needs support and understanding, it is critical for the society to be conscious about our present state of understanding and position. In the self-advocacy movement, young adults with learning disabilities are the subjects of active roles, rather than passive “objects” who accept their social reality only. Chevalier and Buckles (2013) argue that through focusing on dialogical reflection and action, the relations of domination and subordination between oppressors and the oppressed can be overcome. It only requires the stakeholders to constantly reflect their state of mind in revising his or her approach in dealing and living with each other, particularly young adults with learning disabilities in reviewing their abilities and potential. Moreover, it challenges the stakeholders to re-think the meaning of participation in deepening the understanding of the disability experience.

In the field of conflict resolution, it is important to note the criticism of Critical Theory where the subjective experiences of clients and their understanding are being overlooked for the assumed social environment of the individual with the narrow concept of power (Payne, 2005). This is a common scenario for young adults with learning disabilities due to the limited opportunity they have in dealing with conflicts in their lives. Acknowledging this limitation would help guide decisions to apply a critical analytic framework at its appropriate time by the critical theorists and

practitioners when Critical Theory is needed for social justice and equality in the life of young adults with learning disabilities. Though Critical Theory is much alive today especially in the arena of international conflict, its relevance to community mediation makes its stance in transforming the lives of both parties where empathy is recognized and decision making is empowered during the process using transformation stories (Bush & Folger, 1994). This is relevant to young adults with learning disabilities when self-advocacy skills are being used and applied as the core requirement for peer mediation and conflict resolution towards the transformation of their personal lives.

Critical Theory has been widely used and linked by many theorists for conflict resolution training model, for example, Lederach (1995) for peace building, Burton (1996) and Kelman (2002) for problem-solving. Lederach highlighted the priority to overcome conflict in listening to the voice of the trainees. According to Kerr (2013), Lederach attempted to lay the foundation for a process of conflict resolution that seeks to empower individuals to take part in resolving their own conflicts. This is in line with the self-advocacy approach where potential resolutions are contextualized with local knowledge and language in meeting the needs of the people in conflict. Hence, this challenges the process of peer mediation when Critical Theory is applied to listen to the voice of young adults with learning disabilities without the imposition of the 'expert'. In fact, the application aims to reduce entrapment in systems of domination or dependence of the 'expert' underpinning self-advocacy skills. Subsequently, this opens a new role for peer mediators and self-advocates to challenge social injustice and oppression with a critical lens to manage conflicts within the system.

The point is Critical Theory emphasizes long-term, structural social change in assisting oppressed populations. In this study, peer mediation allows young adults with learning disabilities to have more power to control their own lives and problems in meeting their needs in a practical and sustainable way (O'Brien, 2005). Hansen (2008) concludes with a new paradigm for conflict resolution to constantly challenge its position in resisting an unjust status quo with the co-existence on other theoretical orientation. This brings meaning in this paradigm shift when their voices are heard in definite term. This highlights the useful proposition regarding the integration of self-advocacy in peer mediation for conflict resolution within its context between the individuals and the world. Hence, Theory of Human Motivation is to describe the dynamics and relevance of the individuals and the world.

### **Theory of Human Motivation**

The dynamics and relevance of an individual with its surrounding world explain the need for one to grow and improve with life purposes. When a young adult with learning disabilities is viewed as an individual, it is critical to note the individual needs from the fundamental basic needs, and progressively the needs for personal fulfillment at different levels in the world. In humanistic approach, Maslow (1954) has conceptualized a theory of human motivation referred to as the hierarchy of needs depicted in a pyramid with the ranking of fundamental human needs at the bottom to the highest rank of self-actualisation (Figure 2.1). Each individual has his/her basic physiological drives such as hunger and thirst as well as safety needs and social needs. Once the fundamental needs are met, the more sophisticated target would be pursued at the next order. Typically, the hierarchy of needs is viewed as individualistic. This is relevant in viewing young adults with learning disabilities as an individual in his own right underpinning the emancipation of self. The argument

is the notion of recognizing the significance of individualistic needs within its context beyond the individual capacity in young adults with learning disabilities through social empowerment. Whilst young adults with learning disabilities pursue for a higher order of needs with opportunity and choices, the issue of quality of life is questioned practically. The point is, at the core of needs fulfillment, personal satisfaction and quality of life are equally important because they make us feel valued as community members. Transformation of lives in young adults with learning disabilities requires a sustainable support system towards the achievement of a holistic well-being.



*Figure 2.1.* Hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954)

In relation to human activity such as peer mediation in this study, the individuals interact with each other concerning their goals and needs to be fulfilled. Misunderstanding and conflicts take place within the context of their interaction. From this perspective, those who have their fundamental needs met consistently are more likely to overcome their setbacks in the pursuit of the more sophisticated needs due to their experiences of stability. On the other hand, people who have not had their needs met might become defensive in their action which contributes to the

notion of conflict, aggression and violence as described by most researchers (Burton, 1996; Galtung, 2000). The intermediate order of love and a sense of belonging can be pursued by young adults with learning disabilities as the aim of peer mediation and conflict resolution. Hence, this fills the gap for young adults with learning disabilities to develop their self-esteem from within and beyond.

The achievement of self-actualisation can be possible when transformation takes its position in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. The ability of expressing their needs and emotion is the best measure and achievement. In relation to conflict resolution, Burton (1996) and Galtung (2000) approached it as preventative critical conflict transformation which involves productive dialogue to assist oppressed people in receiving the services, skills, and resources they need to achieve durable resolutions. This applies in the context of peer mediation.

Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation has been critiqued as a theory which views a person as an individual with its hierarchy of needs emphasizing self-improvement towards self-actualisation. Even though it is viewed as a process in a hierarchical order for personal attainment, the needs of acceptance and collective living in a community are often overlooked but equally important. The achievement of the state of collective living is not impossible with the continuous effort of promoting inter-relationship living with each other. It is important to uphold the inter-relationship living with each other whilst maintaining the dynamic of the individual needs within its constant change and development. Hence, Social Interdependence Theory is discussed further to achieve a more holistic well-being for the individual within the social context.

## **Social Interdependence Theory**

*We are all fundamentally, irreconcilably, both relational and interdependent, and this actual interdependence – are not some ideological construction of independence – should be the starting point for any conceptualization of the human condition. (Fyson & Cromby, 2013, p.1165)*

Social interdependence happens when individuals share similar purposes for a task in which success is shared and relies on others' actions (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). Deutsch's (1949) theory of cooperation and competition provided a focal point for the formulation of social interdependence theories in the mid-to-late 1900s based on the work of Kurt Lewin (1946) and the Gestalt school of psychology. Gestalt psychology studies how people view and comprehend the relation of the whole to the parts that make up that whole whilst Lewin argues the existence of a group within a societal structure. Deutsch (1949) extended Lewin's theories and formed a theory of cooperation and competition with three types of social interdependence: positive, negative, and an absence of social interdependence. According to Deutsch, the type of interdependence within a situation determined an individual's interactions, which subsequently determined the outcomes based on the achievement of each other's goals (Johnson & Johnson, 2005).

It is seen as a process in Figure 2.2 with three variables: interdependence, interaction pattern, and outcomes. Positive interdependence happens when interaction among group members is promoted with effective actions and promotive interaction patterns in achieving positive psychological processes and a higher quality of relationships and psychological health. This relates to constructive management of conflicts when participants feel satisfied with the outcome. Negative interdependence is seen as detracting from group interaction with bungling and contrient interaction patterns which results in negative psychological processes. For instance, negative interdependence occurs when conflict happens between two

parties with detracted interaction and other negative actions and destructive outcomes. The condition of no interdependence is the result of an absence of group interaction which takes no part in the process. When there is an absence of interaction, conflict stays within the person in which other possible actions such as disruptive behaviors and avoidance may happen. In relation to peer mediation, interdependence happens when each individual is given opportunity to self-advocate and interact, to peer mediate and subsequently resolve their conflict as an outcome to the situation at each of their capacity. It promotes positive interdependence in a constructive process where effort to achieve a higher quality of relationships is expected to be the outcome with its effective and promotive interaction patterns.

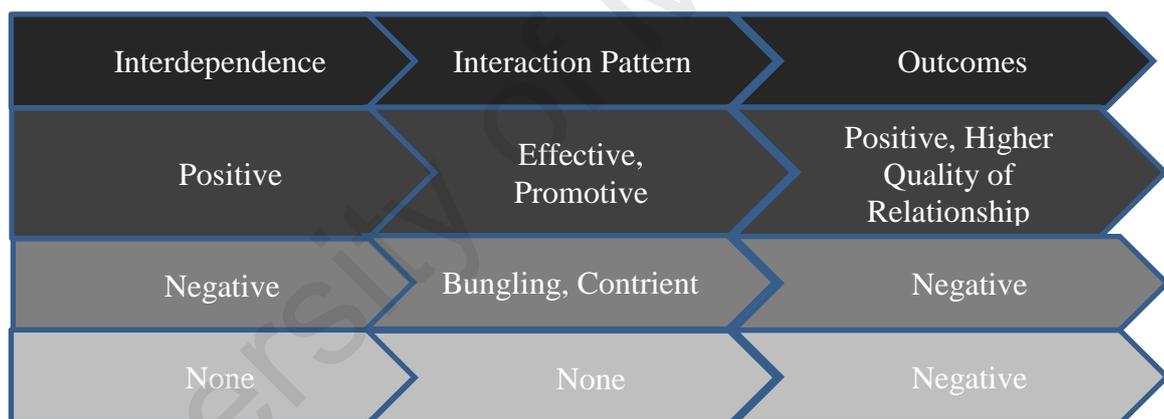


Figure 2.2. Overview of social interdependence theory (Deutsch, 1949)

Social interdependence theory ‘proposes a taxonomy of interdependence situations and outlines the implications of situation structure for intrapersonal and interpersonal processes’ (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). From the self-advocacy perspective, individualistic learning takes its position to speak up and make choices in personal life with freedom. This relates to the term *independence*, which refers to aspects of human functioning that involve being a physically and mentally separate individual. When self-advocates learn and are able to speak up and make their own

choices, they have achieved some level of independence in their lives. Rusbult and Van Lange (2008) describe this situation as a *within*-person perspective in most psychological theories. No man is an island. We depend on each other and live with each other in our varied setting where the term *interdependence* relates to the aspects of human functioning that involve connections among people including young adults with learning disabilities. This *between*-person relations are as meaningful as the individuals themselves (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Subsequently, human separateness and connectedness within the cultural activities form the structure of independence and interdependence (Raeff, 2006).

When conflict happens between two individuals in any social and cultural activities, each person is a physically and mentally separate individual with his behavioural patterns and subjective experiences. Often, according the Rusbult & Van Lange, interactions are shaped by the other party's needs, thoughts and motives in relation to one another where transformation might take its position. Independence and interdependence occur in multifaceted behavioral processes in the process of peer mediation for conflict resolution as a transformative process. When an individual speaks up in the process of peer mediation, the notion of independence takes its position by expressing its needs, thoughts and motives to achieve conflict resolution. When both parties are given the opportunity to work for a common goal in resolving their conflict, interdependence is conceptualized within the cultural activities as a process of transformation and understanding of trust between parties involved. In peer mediation, when the disputants are given the opportunity to speak up about their conflict experience whilst peer mediators take the effort in listening and guiding the disputants, trust is being built among them and between them and the peer mediators. Asserted by Rusbult and Van Lange (2008), it is important to re-

analyse the application of social interdependence theory in term of its interpersonal interaction in a social setting by promoting long-term outcomes.

Carnaby (1998) conducted a comparative study of residential services in London and Milan to reflect the role of interdependence in the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities. It requires the individual's sense of self to be developed at a sufficient level before the individual is able to integrate with the local community. He urged the community to review its approach in its failure on social integration for community living where one of the possible ways to achieve is when *independence* and *interdependence* is weaved together as a valued approach in its application. With the knowledge of self in the model of self-advocacy, there should be an avenue for its consistencies in the structure to support the interpersonal dynamics on group living situations. This structure addresses the impact of social interdependence in its application, which in this study is peer mediation.

Johnson and Johnson (2009) have been prominent in their research on the social interdependence theory with the use of cooperative learning for the educators. The application of social interdependence theory to education has been widely used in social and educational psychology in practice with success and effectiveness where there were greater levels of oral discussion of curriculum material, higher achievement, and frequent use of higher-order reasoning strategies as compared to individualistic learning. Johnson and Johnson (2005) categorized interdependence into three categories: outcome, means, and boundary. Outcome interdependence includes goals and rewards which can be real or fantasized. Positive outcome interdependence tends to result in increased achievement and productivity.

In peer mediation, the achievement is the resolved conflict whilst self-advocacy with mutual understanding of each other is the reward. Means

interdependence includes resource, role, and task interdependence. They overlap and are dependent on each other in their application. In relation to this study, this applies to the roles of peer mediators, disputants, and support staff. Tasks are assigned accordingly with each party having their responsibility to achieve. Hence, the boundaries between individuals are defined for who is interdependent with whom within the setting. This includes the disputant when conflict happens (negative interdependence), the identity of peer mediators and the support staff who promotes positive interdependence, and environmental interdependence which could be the setting of conflict and peer mediation.

It is important to note the overlapping roles and dependency on each other in the relationships with its ultimate goal of a higher quality of relationships and psychological health in social interdependence theory. It is believed that the stronger the interdependence, the greater the perception that a group is a unified and coherent whole in which the members are bonded together (Gaertner & Schopler, 1998; Lickel, Hamilton, Wierzchowska, Lewis, Sherman & Uhles, 2000; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). This depicted the idealistic ideology in the self-advocacy movement where young adults with learning disabilities are bonded together in speaking out their ability, potential and rights as individuals. Social interdependence theory provides insights in achieving long-term outcomes when the lives of young adults with learning disabilities are being interconnected and transformed progressively in the manner of their ability to resolve conflicts among themselves.

The implication of an inter-relationship between theory and practice in verifying critical theory, Maslow's theory of human motivation and social interdependence theory are practical for the implementation of peer mediation and conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities. Recognising the

oppressed lives of young adults with learning disabilities in view of the self-advocacy development, critical theory provides the stance to motivate their individualistic life towards social empowerment underpinning the application of cooperative learning. I believe that effective practice derives from validated theory when the theory is stated with effective procedures for practitioners to use (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Hence, for the purpose of this study, practical procedures are deduced and evaluated through participatory action research to produce a practical handbook for peer mediators. The application of the procedures to be implemented in a wide range of settings followed by evaluation is seen as a limitation to evaluate the application of these theories in this study, but is highly recommended for future research.

### **Review of Related Models**

The review of related models in the field of self-advocacy, peer mediation and conflict resolution is to supplement the evidence for a theoretical framework for this study. These models are extracted from related literatures which were found relevant to support the three variables of the study with its historical review and concept.

#### **A Model of Self-Advocacy**

The model of self-advocacy (Figure 2.3) is rooted in the civil rights movement with the emphasis on the principles of normalization and self-help movements for adults with disabilities in the United States (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer & Eddy, 2005). The overprotection by the authority figures in the transition of student with disabilities into adult life was advocated in the movement of independent living. Self-advocacy was associated with self-determination skills in

schools and adult lives towards a seamless transition at all stages. Hence, a model of self-advocacy was framed to guide and support teachers and practitioners in the application for instructional strategies and future research agenda. It is noted that self-advocacy does not imply insisting on everything with everyone, but requires effective communication on personal goals and preferences which matter. It is a matter of constant self-improvement by young adults with learning disabilities and the stakeholders involved in their support in evolving the knowledge of self and knowledge of rights.

From the knowledge of self and knowledge of rights, self-advocacy is believed to develop in progressive stages with interlinked relationships to reach effective communication and leadership, some at a personal level whilst some can be achieved through a systemic level depending on the approach in the application of the model. The knowledge of self is essential for the individual to be developed for collective benefits in the extension of knowledge of rights. This includes knowing their own strength, preferences, goals, dreams, interests, learning style, support needs and responsibility. Philosopher John Dewey argued that citizens should be taught to think reflectively, considering alternatives and reasons on all sides to achieve democracy (Baron & Brown, 1991). This is closely related to self-advocacy where young adults with learning disabilities are able to make their decision and self-advocate in a reflective manner for their own good and collective benefits, for instance, as office bearers in the self-advocacy group, and in this study, as peer mediators. This affirms the knowledge of rights in its application. In relation to this study, personal rights, community rights, human service rights, steps to redress violation and steps to advocate for change shall be applicable.

The progressive self-advocacy development implicates the possibility of the achievement from self-advocacy movement and the need not only to develop self-advocates for the movement, but to progressively and systematically provide training opportunity for young adults with learning disabilities in communication and leadership development for supporting one another. The notion of communication in this study shall include assertiveness, negotiation, articulation, body language, listening and compromise. In leadership, knowledge of group's rights, team dynamics and roles, knowledge of resources, advocating for others and organisational participation shall be visible as the study develops. This echoes the objectives of this study where young adults with learning disabilities take their own lead in conflict resolution using self-advocacy skills in peer mediation. Besides, the possibility of the peer mediators to be included as research partners in the later stage of the study shall provide more evidence in term of the developemnt of their leadership skills of team dynamics and roles.

In Malaysia, the self-advocacy model is not concretised as to date. However, it is noted that the commencement of the self-advocacy movement in Malaysia has complemented the training element for and by young adults with learning disabilities in relation to the development of self-advocacy. It is based on the self-advocacy training curriculum developed by the self-advocacy organization in Malaysia (United Voice, 2013) since its commencement and development. There are five main topics:

1. Introduction on Self-Advocacy
2. Knowing Your Rights
3. Self-Awareness and Understanding Learning Disabilities
4. How To Speak Up
5. Making Choices

It is noted that even though the topics are not based on the model of self-advocacy during its planning, some elements are of equivalent and compatible contents in its delivery. These five topics relate to the elements in knowledge of self, knowledge of rights and some parts of communications and leadership for the promotion of self-advocacy groups in Malaysia. Self-advocacy training has been conducted by the self-advocacy organization which is recognized by the Government. It has provided a basic understanding and practical training for the young adults with learning disabilities in understanding their rights and knowledge as self-advocates. The idea underpinning the five topics is teaching the young adults to make careful decisions as self-advocates and for the operation of self-advocacy groups. Nevertheless, it is critical to review the format and delivery of the training for its relevance and practicality.



## **A Model of Peer Mediation**

Mediation is a process of helping two people to realize that they need help and it is possible to resolve the conflicts that happened. Peer mediation is seen as a form of conflict resolution education which teaches and offers learners practice in the skills of resolving conflict useful for life (Lane-Garon, Yergat & Kralowec, 2012). Peer mediators are being encouraged to view the disputants as their equal partner during the process. It has varied forms in different settings such as in school, legal and community in a larger context but shares the values of facilitation, active listening, empathy, cooperation and empowerment that unite community mediation and practitioners in its models of practice (Cremin, 2007). Giving both parties a chance to tell their side of the story, and to feel heard by the other party in reaching a solution is a process of self-advocacy in action. Both parties are anticipated to generate their possible solutions during peer mediation to achieve an agreement. On the other hand, peer mediators are to be empowered throughout the peer mediation process with the value of facilitation. It is a learning process when they are committed to working together to practice active listening, empathy, and cooperation with a purpose.

These underpinning values of peer mediation as a process shall formalize into mediation's four distinct stages (Figure 2.4). They are: 1) setting the scene, explaining the process and agreeing to the ground rules, 2) hearing both sides of the story with an emphasis on how each person is feeling, 3) generating possible solutions to the dispute and 4) forming an agreement (Cremin, 2007; Sellman, 2009). All mediation is underpinned by offering disputants the opportunity to enhance their self-advocacy skills in reaching a mutually satisfying outcome facilitated by neutral third-parties, the peer mediators practicing the values of peer mediation. These

values are essential to support the process of peer mediation in achieving its purposes. The process is aided by a peer mediation visual script to be used by peer mediators.

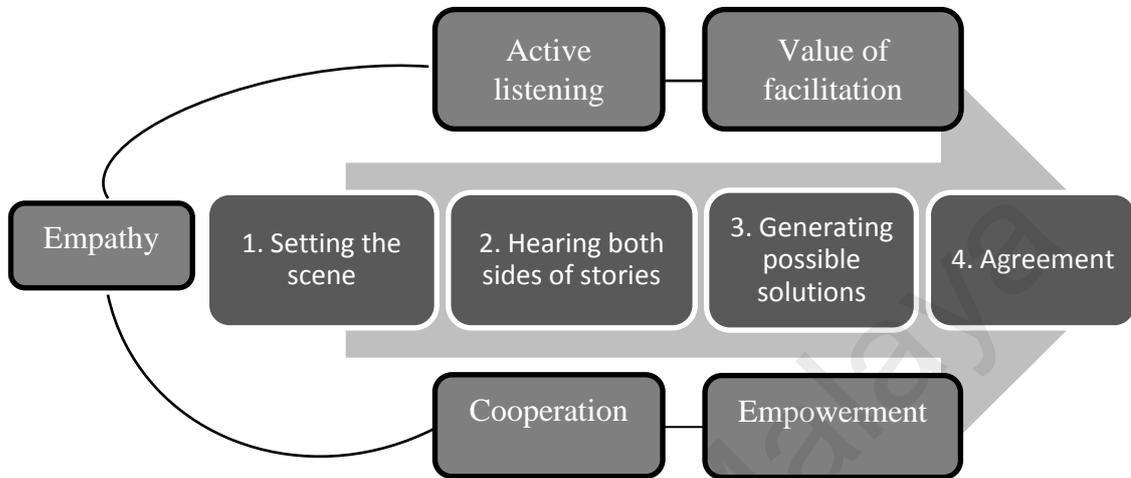


Figure 2.4. A model of peer mediation (Cremin, 2007 and Sellman, 2009)

### A Model of Conflict Resolution

According to Rahim (1983), there are five distinct styles of coping with conflict: (1) the *competing* style promotes a “win-lose” power dynamic between two sides; (2) the *obliging style* tends to prioritize others’ needs and preserve positive relations with them; (3) the *integrating* style attempts to find innovative, mutual solutions that will meet the needs of both sides; (4) the *compromising* style seeks to resolve the conflict by meeting the other side halfway; (5) and the *avoiding* style tends to withdraw from conflict and avoid coping with it directly. Such is explained as Dual Concerns Theory between goals and relationships in human interaction (Katz & Lawyer, 1993). Behrendt and Ben-Ari (2012) highlighted the role of guilt and shame in these interpersonal conflict situations whilst there are many research focused on the negotiation scenarios in a conflict resolution. The emphasis of self-awareness is brought up for further discussion in relation to these interpersonal conflicts and their style of coping.

Based on the analysis in Figure 2.5, if goals are rated over relationships, the approach to conflict will be controlling. There will be the use of power between the relationship resulting win-lose situation. If relationships are valued higher than goals, the choice of conflict resolution strategy will be to avoid the conflict. This means conflict is not solved. When two parties are compromising, they are moderately concerned with their own goals and relationships, to an extent that they give up their own goal and relationship in order to find agreement for the common good. When one accommodates, relationship is of great importance as compared to their own goals. They have in mind conflicts should be avoided to achieve harmony, hence, they accommodate the other party without damaging the relationship. If both goals and relationships are highly prioritized, conflict can be manageable in a constructive manner with 'win-win' outcomes to all parties in a collaborative manner. They view conflicts as problems to be solved and seek a solution to achieve their goals, besides wanting to improve their relationships. They will be satisfied when both parties' conflicts are resolved without any negative feelings.

I believe this model can be taught in a systematic and progressive manner through peer mediation in particular to the peer mediators in developing their sense of self in order to provide support to their peers. Hence, the model of conflict resolution is included as part of the coping style of the potential peer mediators during peer mediation training as one of the criteria to be an effective peer mediator in compromising the conflicts of the disputants.

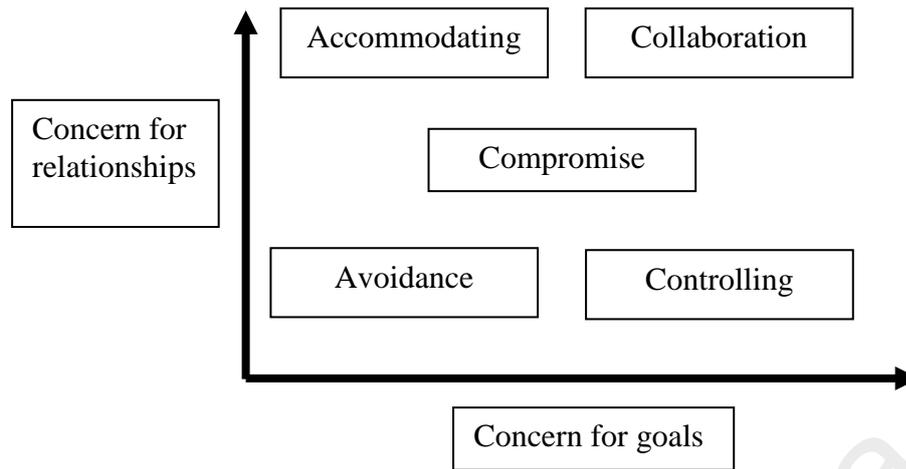


Figure 2.5. A model of conflict resolution strategies (Katz & Lawyer, 1993)

Galtung (2000) positions this outcome using a transcendent method where dialogue is the process in conflict transformation. This is the aim of all conflict resolution education and strategies, where peer mediation would achieve its purpose between goals and relationships in human interaction. The 3 R's – Resolution, Reconstruction and Reconciliation are emphasized as the underpinning concepts to the exercise. This includes solving the original root conflict, repairing damage done and solving the past conflict (Galtung, 2000). As we have understood the lives of young adults with learning disabilities, it is critical for us to re-consider the goals and relationship of human interaction in their lives.

The argument is its application for young adults with learning disabilities in this study where the 3R concept can be exercised. This also challenges the support system to improve their goals and relationships. Jones (2004) asserts that conflict resolution skills are essential for life and should be embraced at all educational levels including young adults with learning disabilities. It aims to achieve the effectiveness in creating a positive and safe environment for all learners (Lane-Garon et al., 2012). Based on the model of conflict resolution, peer mediation aims to achieve a state of

collaboration throughout the process with utmost concern for relationships and goals among young adults with learning disabilities.

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The theoretical framework is formed in the presence of young adults with learning disabilities as the key character. In the review of theories, Critical Theory, Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory are discussed as an overarching framework in relation to the lives of young adults with learning disabilities as the focal point of this study. Critical Theory is to provide a theoretical platform for integrating knowledge, promoting understanding and facilitating interdisciplinary action in achieving social justice and equality for young adults with learning disabilities when transformation of lives happens from the oppressed life towards social change through self-advocacy. Self-advocacy in peer mediation produces shared power with quality of relationship and support in the process. It is an ongoing transformation when young adults with learning disabilities take control to manage conflict in a constructive and sustainable manner. Henceforth, it goes beyond the role of being research partners by sharing power as a process of emancipation of self to social empowerment.

Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation focuses on developing a holistic life of well-being within the personal hierarchy of needs towards self-advocacy and peer mediation. It is a progressive personal fulfillment in achieving a balanced life with utmost quality as an individual. It extends to social interdependence theory in conceptualizing the processes of cultural production and individual transformation in which conflict and its resolution assumes a pivotal role in productive communication among these young adults. This means the concept of interdependence inter-relates critically with the quality of relationship as the long-term constructive outcome of

living with each other in the community. Critical Theory, Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory present as an overarching approach that integrates levels of analysis beyond the social context of young adults with learning disabilities underpinning their lived experience. By understanding the multi-layered lives of young adults with learning disabilities together with its application, dilemmas and challenges, these theories support the understanding of the system in promoting social inclusion of young adults with learning disabilities when peer mediation takes its position in forming a pathway for inclusive change.

The integration of theories weaves self-advocacy in peer mediation towards conflict resolution where each agency is neither totally free nor constrained. The model of self-advocacy provides the basis for peer mediation with its core elements to be applied during the conduct. Peer mediation serves its role in achieving conflict resolution as the intermediate process. Critical Theory serves its rationale in meeting the needs of young adults with learning disabilities in a sustainable way when they are able to resolve their conflicts in a constructive manner. Each of the models has its sub-elements and processes which overlaps with one another in the application in achieving conflict resolution. This results in the application of theory of human motivation and social interdependence theory when young adults with learning disabilities become active in their daily activity towards a higher quality of life. This includes their participation as peer mediators and research partners where opportunity was utilized for progressive personal fulfillment and empowerment in this lifelong quality education in view of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (Greenwood, 2017; United Nation, 2015). Hence, these theories direct the interconnections between the models and are emphasized with its attention on understanding how peer mediation is shaped and framed by the theories, and the

dynamics between the theories in its application in the lived experience of young adults with learning disabilities in the community.

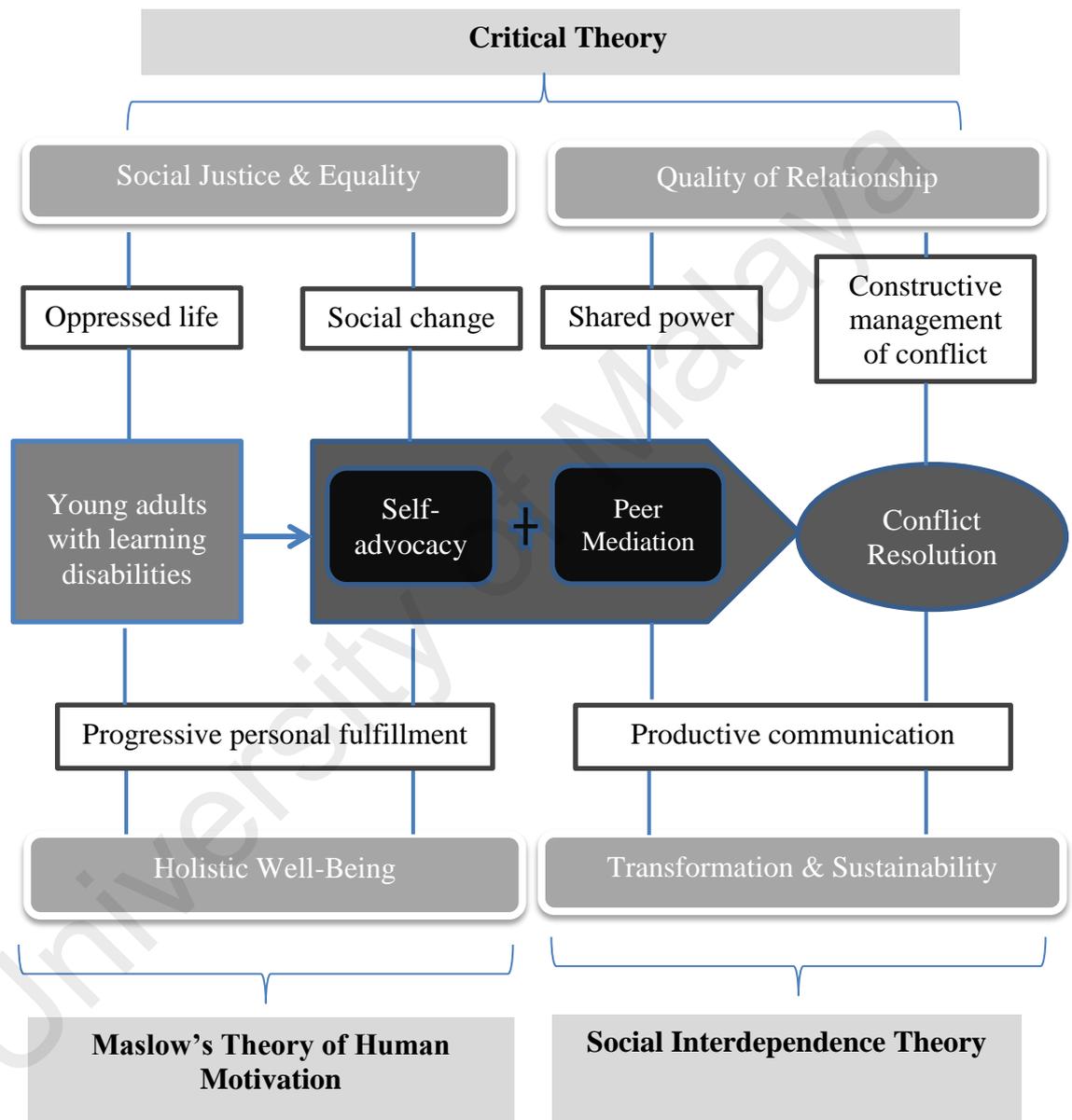


Figure 2.6. Theoretical framework of the study

## **Review of Past Research**

The review of past research and related literature in the following section posits the need for a comprehensive understanding in social and individual transformation as interrelated processes, especially in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. The areas of literature identified for review are divided into three parts where the understanding self-advocacy in a larger context, the context of peer mediation and the relevance of conflict resolution in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. Each of these areas formed a distinct part for this study for critical analysis and review. A summary of the review constituted relevant points as the study proceeds.

### **Understanding Self-Advocacy in a Larger Context**

Understanding and analyzing the context of self-advocacy movement, its impact on the lives of young adults with learning disabilities to gain a voice, has made its stance internationally in different regions and locally in Malaysia (Armstrong, 2002; Goodley, 2000; Yeo, 2007). At the same time, the mushrooming of self-advocacy groups in different regions and countries as a collective movement has given much directions in framing learning disability services and policy making for the twentieth century and the way forward (APCD Foundation, 2013; Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006). Even though Buchanan and Walmsley (2006) reviewed the historical perspective based on UK experience, the tension and challenges in self-advocacy does pose arguments for other regions to reflect upon, for instance, the role of the Government in relation to self-advocates into the service structure and its policy.

In Malaysia, our Government has provided funding for training and setting up self-advocacy groups. Self-advocacy movement still in its blooming stage at most states (Maya, personal communication, January 9, 2015). On the other hand, the quality of advocacy support in making self-advocacy effective does affect the quality of concrete issues to be brought up for constructive arguments in the implementation of the local authority to consider their points of view. It is still controversial to debate this in our current state in Malaysia as young adults with learning disabilities are not prominent in representing themselves as a collective body. Hence, it is critical for all stakeholders involved in supporting the self-advocates to understand the implication of the support provided for a progressive development of the individual whilst collaborating with one another in this blooming stage. This can be achieved through the commitment from the Government in promoting for opportunity to realise the impact of self-advocacy movement in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities.

To realize the impact of self-advocacy movement, self-advocacy needs to be understood within a larger socio-political context rather than a function of personal characteristics (Buchanan and Walmsley, 2006). From the onset, a person's ability to speak up is being emphasized and measured in term of its success or failure. To some extent, a critical analysis on the person's home, family, socio-economic problem and their support system tend to be overlooked. For instance, for most young adults with learning disabilities in a home setting, it is beyond reality that they can name their own reality (Aspis, 1997). Even if they were given the necessary skills to enhance their own life, it is unlikely to witness the responsibilities of the embedded system to work in collaboration with young adults with learning disabilities as co-creators for a new direction of system change (Armstrong, 2002). The echo continues in accepting

young adults with learning disabilities to be effective in supporting the development of the community in the Government policy. No one could name the reality of young adults with learning disabilities in contributing to an inclusive agenda for all as a minority group of people (Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006). This reflects the needs to expand our horizon beyond self-advocacy at a larger socio-political context even though the agenda of inclusion would be controversial to come to reality in most effort. This highlights the quality of life of young adults with learning disabilities and the quality of support to be in its critical position to realize the impact of self-advocacy in the agenda of inclusion.

### **Self-Advocacy and Quality of Life**

Understanding the quality of life of a young adult with learning disabilities has been controversial in today's fast paced lives of economic and technology advancement. Described by Goodley (2014), we are living in the midst of neoliberal-ableism where we are expected to respond to austerity through adhering to ableism's ideals. This means the community is defined and geared towards ableism as workers and consumers. This includes the disabled people to become 'able-disabled' to be included and to enjoy quality of life as an individual. The argument is quality of life does not equate to capitalism and consumerism. Instead, the development of social emotional well-being should be explored in the lives of people with learning disabilities amongst the disabled people underpinning quality of life in times of austerity.

Realistically, we are aware of the notion of invisibility, low priority, the disabling impact of society and the nature of their impairment which has resulted disproportionately negative experience of life (Caldwell, 2010; Rohwerder, 2013). According to Rohwerder, they faced increased risks and death as a result of their

disabilities. For instance, the Justice for LB campaign (JusticeforLB.org) in United Kingdom was one of the best evident in quering the quality of life in these young adults with learning disabilities as a human being in relation to quality of support. In our local context in Malaysia, the issues and quality of life of persons with disabilities has been challenged in our Disability Act 2008 as their rights to live. However, the impact of the quality of life of people with learning disabilities particularly as a group has yet been proven simply due to the functional gap of self-advocacy in their personal lives which does not carry through to a collective voice as a community. This challenges the role and function of self-advocacy in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities as a striving individual and as a collective body in a larger context. This brought us to re-think about our role in living together to support one another in times of austerity.

Past research has come into term that self-advocacy can improve the quality of life in young adults with learning disabilities (Anderson & Bigby, 2017; Chapman, et al, 2011). It was noted that self-advocacy and advocacy support come hand-in-hand in its application of quality of life when ‘choice and control’ are the integral part in planning for the social care support (Williams & Porter, 2017). As young adults with learning disabilities speak up their life and needs, appropriate advocacy support would be given to support their needs. According to Beadle-Brown, Leigh, Whelton, Richardson, Beecham, Baumker and Bradshaw (2016), in determining the quality of life, the nature and quality of support is important. In their research, it was not surprised to note the relatively poor quality of life and quality of support in the lives of people with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. This should challenge the development of self-advocacy movement in expanding the individual needs to a wider community context.

Parmenter (2014) in his paper explored issues related to social inclusion and quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities suggested researchers to embrace a wider world context in our inquiry. Self-image of people with intellectual disabilities is being emphasized as one of the pillars for quality of life with the experience of the feelings of well-being by them. In progressing towards quality of life, he suggested a symbolic-interactionism with three interactive components: the person's conceptualization of self; the person's functional behaviours within the environment; and societal responses to the individual. His proposition brings us to a wider community context in developing the sense of self in young adults with learning disabilities as an autonomous individual within an interdependent societal context in achieving his/her aspiration of life. The wider community context includes the roles and challenges of family and community support in accepting and valuing the developmental learning milestones towards a meaningful life for people with learning disabilities (Fish, 2016). As such, self-advocacy should play its role in the life of people with learning disabilities where each party should understand and practice without which quality of life would just being a rhetoric concept without its meaning and implication for practice.

### **Self-Advocacy and Quality of Support**

Self-advocacy can achieve change in people's attitude by challenging oppressive images of people with learning difficulties (Armstrong, 2002). During the last decades, persons with learning disabilities have striven for self-advocacy and empowerment, that is, to be in control of their own lives (Chapman & Tilley, 2013; Gilmartin & Slevin, 2009; Jingree & Finlay, 2013). We have witnessed movements, such as self-advocacy movements, redefining disability as a problem to be localized at a wider political, social and economic circumstances rather than at an individual

level, and claiming to have rights of choice and self-determination equal to those persons without disabilities (Armstrong, 2002; Fyson & Cromby, 2013). In Fyson and Cromby's analysis of human rights of people with intellectual disabilities, the policymakers and practitioners are urged to take responsibility to develop realistic understanding upon the choices imposed on people with intellectual disabilities during the construction of their services. This implicates the quality of support should be equitable to the relational understandings of personhood. For instance, Khadijah Rohani, Abu Bakar, Sharifah, Rohaida, Norani and Hidayah (2014) recommended for motivational courses and prolonged counseling sessions to enhance the self-confidence of persons with disabilities to live independently in their career development. This brought us to consider the critical needs of developing the sense of self in dealing with the societal challenges besides educating the society in regards to the rights of persons with disabilities. Such suggestion should underpin the model of self-advocacy as its fundamental agenda incompatible to the personhood development and systemic empowerment at large.

Jingree & Finlay (2013) have provided a strong case for a shift in viewing and embracing individuals with learning disabilities in larger socio, economic and political terms rather than as a function of individual challenges and disabilities. The study conducted on individual with learning disabilities' own lived experiences, challenges and how they have suffered failure and frustration rather than empowerment and equity. It is critical to note the "voice" of young adults with learning disabilities featured over their problems and experiences in advocacy support (Armstrong, 2002; Chapman & Tilley, 2013). The argument is the need for effective advocacy to happen which does not only rely on young adults with learning disabilities but the understanding and support from the surrounding services

including their family and the service providers. Specifically spoken by young adults with learning disabilities is the need to provide more choices and control towards person-centered thinking within service cultures (Williams & Porter, 2017). Such inclusive perspective has built a more comprehensive appreciation in understanding young adults with learning disabilities and self-advocacy as a whole picture.

From the individual perspective, lack of self-confidence was acknowledged by persons with disabilities to sustain a job and achieve independent living (Khadijah Rohani et al., 2014). This derives from the challenges and dilemmas of self-advocacy movement where choices and rights of young adults with learning disabilities were being overlooked by the professional practitioner. This critically implies the need to have quality of support in developing their self-confidence which is part of the model of self-advocacy. The argument lies in the development of knowledge of self and knowledge of rights towards communication and leadership in young adults with learning disabilities with realistic support from the community. Quality of support comes with a good sense of self in the professional practitioners as they put on their critical and reflective lens of service as their ethics, roles and responsibilities.

Chapman and Tilley (2013) in exploring the role of support workers in self-advocacy identified some complex ethical issues with the pursuit of social change and the attainment of rights for people with learning difficulties (Caldwell, 2010). According to Caldwell (2010), the role of support workers in understanding the 'ethic of care' is essential to support self-advocates to be more self-directed, both individually and collectively underpinning the issues of relational power in shaping self-advocacy support. In Malaysia, lack of knowledge and skills in self-advocacy and quality of support has been the issue in guiding and providing counselling to students with learning disabilities in schools (Hanini Harun, Hasnah & Salleh, 2012).

Hence, it requires the notion of working with and alongside to the reality of difficulty in conceptualizing and understanding by people with learning difficulties upon the multi-faceted interactions between emotion, feelings and the complexities of everyday life. This challenges the support workers as ‘neutral facilitators’ in believing the potential and ability of people with learning difficulties by providing insights, care and support in the process of self-advocacy as a professional practice model (Armstrong, 2002; Fish, 2016). Implicitly, support workers’ sense of self is pivotal in shaping the relational autonomy and reciprocal relationship in the interdependent roles of self-advocacy support. Subsequently, it aims to set a role model for young adults with learning disabilities to be developed for leadership roles.

### **Self-Advocacy and Leadership**

The leadership of self-advocacy movement would depend on how the model of self-advocacy being imparted into the lives of young adults with learning disabilities with quality of life and quality of support. The development of the self-advocacy movement has achieved greater participation of individuals in various social contexts in today’s society from the various inclusive research projects actively participated in by people with learning difficulties (Goodley & Lawthom, 2005; Iriarte, O’Brien & Chadwick, 2014; O’Brien, McConkey, & Garcia-Iriarte, 2014; Townson et al., 2007). These research projects have been implied as the ‘fruit’ of the social model since its implementation and advance in a new direction for ‘nothing about us without us’ movement for people with intellectual disabilities (Strnadova & Cumming, 2014). The element of being able to explain who they are and what they want is increasing with the opportunity given. This implicates a good potential quality of leadership skills among young adults with learning disabilities. Subsequently, they have become bearers of their own life with dignity. These young

adults with learning disabilities, as co-researchers and authors, assert for a more constructivist and ecological approach based on a shift from individual victimization to an interrelationship with the environment (Bigby & Frawley, 2010; Bigby, Frawley, & Ramcharan, 2014; Chapman et al., 2011). This clearly challenges the environment to accept and embrace the differences and uniqueness of these young adults with learning disabilities in the implication for practice.

Looking beyond personal context into disability movement, Foster - Fishman, Jimenez, Valenti, and Kelley (2007) conducted a study on leadership within the disabilities community in USA. The leaders concluded that there is a need for a more collective approach to leadership where there is an element of a more integrated, action- learning approach to leadership development on top of the challenges faced in leadership development. This study challenged the leadership in self-advocacy movement to re-examine their status for sustainable leadership globally. Furthermore, Caldwell (2010) in exploring the life stories of leaders in the self-advocacy movement brought up the issue of lack of opportunity for leadership development among the self-advocates in the typical stream. The increased life story research on the self-advocates in these recent years underpinning self-advocacy movement should provide the avenue for sustainable leadership development. In his study, he noted the importance of environmental support and relationship in moving forward the leadership development of the self-advocates besides understanding their oppressive past experiences. As the leaders of the self-advocates acknowledged the need of advance leadership development, it is recognised as a life-long learning amidst challenges in the progress. Hence, it is critical to build up the collaborative relationship with the community where more opportunities are given to the self-advocates to take the leadership responsibility.

Based on the self-advocacy movement in Malaysia, the leadership development faces its challenges in the midst of promoting self-advocacy throughout the country. The formation of one self-advocacy organization in the country has limited opportunity for leadership development based on the ratio of young adults with learning disabilities. Leadership development lies in the self-advocacy movement and development where ideology and opportunity are given to young adults with learning disabilities to be leaders. The point is one needs to understand that the increased number of self-advocacy groups does not relate to increased opportunities for self-advocacy, self-determination and societal inclusion to be tangible and meaningful (Armstrong, 2002; Fyson & Cromby, 2013). Group forming may be developed with individuals with potential leadership skills, but sustaining the group with a committed mission has provided another challenge in the development of leadership with quality of support. Hence, this requires new forms of organisations run by people with learning difficulties where the relationship between individuals, the range of services and the communities are formed in line with the Government's responsibility in promoting self-advocacy throughout the nation (Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006; Caldwell, 2010). It is critical to note that the argument is not only for self-advocacy groups in which people with learning disabilities participate, but also for the disability movement in our local context in pursuit of the common political interests underpinning the rights and empowerment of each individual. It is a matter of collaboration between each other in our social context.

## **Understanding the Context of Peer Mediation**

*The peer mediation approach assumes that conflict is a normal and positive force that can accompany personal growth and social change (Shulman, 1996, p.171).*

The concept of peer mediation was developed through the idea of Neighborhood Justice Centers by President Jimmy Carter during 1970's (Guanci, 2002). The goal was to provide an alternative to courts where citizens met to resolve their disputes. Later, it was known as community mediation programs where successful agreements were proven to be effective. The program was then duplicated in school setting to train students to act as neutral third parties to mediate disputes amongst their peers. The effectiveness of the program gained its impact to implement it in all school systems as an alternative to violence and a vehicle for boosting self-esteem in mediators and students in conflict (Cremin, 2007). It brings forth a paradigm shift in promoting conflict education.

### **The Effectiveness of Peer Mediation**

Flecknoe (2005) conducted a literature analysis on peer mediation in UK and US. Most literatures reported the effectiveness of peer mediation as the services were conducted by the researchers and it took place in primary or elementary schools (Bell, Coleman, Anderson, Whelan, & Wilder, 2000; Bickmore, 2001; Cremin, 2002 ; Farrell, Myer, & White, 2001; Hart & Gunty, 1997; Turnuklu, Kacmaz, Gurler, Turk, Kalender, Zengun & Sevkin, 2010). Typically teachers or researchers selected a small group of children for training though a few trained the whole school. The selection of training method depended on funding, carrying out the training out of school curriculum time though some found it threatening to the academic standards. Nevertheless, Stevahn (2004) found that conflict training enhanced academic achievement. The training method was designed by the researchers based on the

understanding of the school culture. The achievement of students' academic implicates the growth in the students' lives.

Cremin (2002) suggested experiential learning to be included in peer mediation training as an effective and creative measure for students to learn. Farrell, Myer and White (2001) used 'Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP)', an experiential learning approach conducted weekly throughout the year. Other methods such as mixed-age tutoring has given opportunity for older children to teach skills to younger pupils (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Shulman, 1996). The sustainability of this method would require a longer training period, within a full 18 months to prepare the younger pupils to assume the role of peer mediator (Guanci, 2002; Sellman, 2002). These different schemes of training were delivered with similar basic techniques except the difference in the initial approach from training a group of peer mediators, or from the whole school approach directly. In Guanci (2002)'s study, he views peer mediators as positive role models due to their commitment and efforts to ensure a healthy school climate. A code of behaviour and a student contract were drawn up to maintain higher standards in its credibility and respect for the whole school.

In evaluating the effectiveness of peer mediation in schools, often it was measured by the amount of peer mediation training and the decline in conflicts happening between children (Hart & Gunty, 1997). Different measurements and results were carried out by the researchers depending on the research objectives (Bell et al., 2000; Bickmore, 2001; Farrell et al., 2001). In most studies, peer mediation programmes are positive in their evaluation (Cremin, 2007). For instance, peer mediators demonstrated more positive attitudes and feelings of empowerment. So did the disputants improve their attitudes drastically towards an acceptable behaviour.

However, the evaluation method was considered difficult because most of them were conducted and evaluated by the researchers. An evaluation from a third party's perspective would be a recommended method to measure the effectiveness of the programme in a more neutral stance.

In a school setting, peer mediation is a student-facilitated problem-solving skill as a part of conflict resolution process (Matloff & Smith, 1999). It is a more viable option as opposed to traditional punitive practices which rely on the adult control of student discipline problems. Hence, it challenged the school environment and gave autonomous voice to students in their adolescent years. Generally, children enjoyed the training programme with different learning points for them though there were a group which reported negative experience like losing friends and teasing by other friends (Humphries, 1999). It is noted that success over the programme has increased the children's self-confidence in resolving conflicts peacefully. The effect of peer mediation led to a reduction of adult supervision (Schmitz, 1994). However, the implementation of peer mediation presented challenges in teacher control in schools where some felt their role was being undermined when children's rights and voice were being accounted for (Carter & Osler, 2000). Hence, this challenged the effectiveness in implementing peer mediation when it was not compatible with the school culture and vision (Sellman, 2002). Sellman asserts that,

*Peer mediation requires of school culture a shift from teacher control to pupil empowerment and from arbitration to mediation as the dominant form of conflict resolution (p.9).*

When there was no modification of the traditional teacher-pupil relationship, it resulted in the failure of peer mediation. This puts the challenge in the mind shifting of adults instead of children who are peer mediators (Bickmore, 2011).

Hence, power issues seemed to be critical to the success of peer mediation when rights-based approach in line with self-advocacy are being practiced and realized.

This implies the critical needs for the support staff in this study to be clear about the implementation of peer mediation. Their understanding shall be based on the impact of real life opportunities to practice peer mediation skills with the sustainability in the programme in the community context. Moreover, analyzing the content of peer mediation mostly on social skills such as presenting positions, listen attentively, communicating, understanding, generating integrative solutions, and reaching mutual agreement on the best course of action, the school curriculum is being challenged to include these life skills as essential learning in schools (Guanci, 2002; Stevahn, 2004; Theberge & Karan, 2004). This implication for curriculum development in the UK was debatable in achieving the status of real life learning in contrast with learning certainties in life which may differ in each individual. Flecknoe (2005) provides an overview criticism on peer mediation to look beyond the school context where the study of conflict could be a central part of the curriculum of the school, for parents, for teachers, for pupils, which leads to productive working relationships. The success of this implementation is suggested to introduce curriculum such as self-advocacy and peer mediation on teacher training courses. This challenges the implication for training courses to apply to community staff beyond the school context.

## **Peer Mediation for Special Needs Population**

No research has been done in this country about the implementation of peer mediation services and conflict resolution education. Hence, little is known about the prevalence of such services and their effectiveness. Jones and Bodtker (1999) and Bodtker (2001) conducted their research on conflict education and peer mediation for special needs populations in a private special needs school in United States. It aimed to reduce inappropriate aggressive behavior and improve school climate (Jones & Bodtker, 1999). Bodtker (2001) challenged the paradigm shift in understanding conflict education for special needs population in its scope of social emotional learning. This is a shift towards affective, behavioral and cognitive aspects of helping the student *understand the nature of conflict, appreciate the role of emotion in conflict, develop problem-solving strategies and learn specific communication and problem-solving behaviors*. The study measured the ability of perspective taking in students after the training, to reduce hostile attribution, to self-manage their emotions and to reduce aggression. The impact of conflict education programmes for special needs population has provided opportunity for students to improve their behaviour.

In implementing peer mediation in school, teachers and administrators of the school were brought to attention about the need of system support as a whole school approach. All students were orientated for the project in conflict education over two times of three-month training periods, an hour per week by the same trainer. Peer mediators were recommended by teachers for training; eight peer mediators were developed who emphasized on bias awareness, communication skills, and the six-stage mediation process. The training approach used experiential and repetitive activities where visual strategies were used. Students acknowledged the challenges in becoming peer mediators but mastery of such skills was an important achievement

for them. With longer training time and much accommodation made for the training, it is concluded that conflict education and peer mediation efforts for a special needs population are workable and advantageous.

Warne (2003) echoed the same results in her peer mediation establishment in a special school context with pupils with moderate learning disabilities where the process developed their social skills and emotional literacy, and played a notable part in increasing cooperation between pupils within the school environment. From the onset, the model of self-advocacy as the underpinning value was not depicted prominently. However, the qualities of constructive relationships were incorporated into the project and reported as a successful outcome. This implicates the possibility of peer mediation to be implemented by individuals with learning disabilities with relevant training and support, where self-advocacy skills can be the focus skills to be developed.

Cremin (2007) reviews her research on peer mediation in three primary schools in Birmingham in an inclusive setting with children with special educational needs, particularly those with social emotional and behavioural difficulties. Peer mediation has challenged the school to review its behavior management method on student-centred discipline in maintaining the health of schools as organisations. The implementation of peer mediation shifts the medical to environmental models of special educational needs to bring about a proactive curriculum to ensure social cognitive skills in the young people. Hence, the voice of the individual is argued as critically important in conflict resolution especially in designing and implementing programmes that reflect the needs and concern that are meant for appropriate support (Kerr, 2013). The rights and needs of persons with disabilities can only be met when

their voice is heard. This challenges the role of the community in transforming a stronger and positive relationship to create a more enabling society.

On the other hand, in relation to the dispute resolution in special educational needs as additional support, it was well-noted by the UK Government that mediation is suggested to be one of the best means as compared to the other common approach such as through courts and tribunals in the field of special educational needs (Riddell, Harris, Smith & Weedon, 2010). In examining the alternative dispute resolution, it was suggested that parents could be steered towards mediation as an alternative to tribunal procedures particularly in regards to special educational matters. This indicates the mediation approach and application has been practiced in the UK. The argument is how the approach can be applicable to the self-advocates in the self-advocacy movement. From the study, parents' voice was well-noted and the response in regards to mediation service was satisfactory. However, the challenge of the mediation service was noted as low usage of mediation due to lack of knowledge about the parents' rights and the dominance of professionalism and bureaucracy. This appears as the dynamic of power and control when the right of consumerism is being considered in its application. In term of its implication for mediation to be applicable to young adults with learning disabilities, the model of self-advocacy needs to be strengthen underpinning the knowledge of rights in the lives of these young adults.

According to Cremin (2007), most of other researches are positivist research into peer mediation with the quantitative data results of reduced aggressiveness, violence, and bullying behavior or enhanced self-esteem and positive behavior. There is limited qualitative research such as conducted by Tyrrell & Farrell (1995) for peer mediation with interpretativistic paradigm where the effectiveness of peer

mediation is grounded on action research to evaluate peer mediation programmes in two primary schools in Northern Ireland (as cited in Cremin, 2007). The assertion for this research to be conducted as a qualitative research is to explicate the impact of self-advocacy in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities where their voice would be taken into consideration for its implication of the knowledge of rights. Hence, the evolvement of peer mediation implicates the need for peer mediation to be implemented among young adults with learning disabilities specifically which would be an advantage with the establishment of the self-advocacy movement as the foundational agenda. The point is, to achieve sustainability in this proposed agenda of peer mediation for special needs population, I believe it could impact the school system to look beyond behaviour management on students with special needs where young adults with learning disabilities could be the contributing factor in this paradigm shift underpinning the model of self-advocacy and knowledge of rights.

### **Understanding the Relevance of Conflict Resolution in the Lives of Young Adults with Learning Disabilities**

It is evident to note the development of the self-advocacy movement has impacted the lives of young adults with learning disabilities when they are able to speak up and make choices in their lives. Beyond individuality, interpersonal relationship counts during encounters and meetings. Research has shown encouraging and empowering effects of self-advocacy especially in the prospect of friendship and improving their self-determination (Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen, & Algozzine, 2001; Mason, Timms, Hayburn, & Watters, 2013). On the other hand, there are limited studies on conflict among young adults with learning disabilities even though it is viewed as a realistic prospect in any interpersonal relationships in the field of special educational needs (Kerr, 2013; Larkin, Jahoda, MacMahon & Pert,

2012; Larkin, Jahoda & MacMohan, 2013; Riddell, Harris, Smith, & Weedon, 2010). For instance, Palmer (2000) highlighted the critical need of self-advocacy and conflict resolution training for people with disabilities in postsecondary education particularly in requesting for classroom accommodation. Larkin, et al., (2013) conducted a systematic review to understand the contribution of social cognitive factors to problems of aggression presented by people with intellectual disabilities. They then concluded the possibilities to work on the cognitive processing of those who are aggressive and offend in the form of individual tailored interventions using the Social Information Processing model. Besides supporting the individual to understand their emotional cues and interpersonal attributes, such training and intervention was taken as extending the knowledge of rights of students with disabilities which could yield positive outcome in their life in college and work setting. This makes a concrete stance to fill the gap in rectifying the needs of conflict resolution knowledge and social processing skill by young adults with learning disabilities underpinning self-advocacy skills.

All conflicts appear to have certain characteristics and processes in a life cycle. Katz and Lawyer (1993) related conflict in phases of time with its relevance to culture and historical situation. This means conflict has a history and antecedent condition related to emotional baggage in the past which include previous experiences and knowledge, past behavior, conversation, perception, successes and failure (Leimdorfer, 1995). In term of culture, Tyler and Jones (1998) view conflict as a product of interdependent contextual forces. This is based on the ecosystemic approach where conflicting parties claim to have their own good reasons for their action (Bateson, 1972; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Conflict is intensified when there is negative view and consequence between the parties. Resolution requires analysis of

each party's role in the conflict in relation to the system as a whole. Hence, conflict is a product of the interaction of individuals or groups within a context in the system. Galtung (2000) describes conflict as a life cycle which can be divided into three phases:- before violence, during violence and after violence with the core elements of attitude, behaviour and contradiction. Typically, conflict is intensified from clashes of actions or ideas and will be resolved in a cyclic movement to become a history and reappears in another cycle. Hence, another conflict is commonly repeated within the same context, or with another person depending on how the issue is being solved.

Within the process and characteristics of a conflict, it is understood in two views, the escalating conflicts and de-escalating conflicts. In escalating conflicts, distress is intensified where communication is becoming increasingly difficult. Such interpersonal conflict is compounded by detrimental effects on the lives of young adults with learning disabilities with aggressive behaviours due to overlooked accumulative frequent experiences of victimization (Larkin, et al., 2012). Trust is reduced with extraneous people involved in the process, especially individuals in the transition between adolescence and adulthood. On the other hand, de-escalating conflicts would reduce distress as communication would be effective based on the parties' needs and goals. Trust is regained in the process of negotiation with third parties involved to facilitate peaceful resolution.

Conflict education has been implemented in US for the past three decades in educational settings with the aim to create a safe and constructive learning environment, enhance students' social and emotional development and create a constructive conflict community (Jones, 2004). Most of the research in understanding conflict was conducted in school settings where the perceptions of students on conflict were accounted for (Dhillon & Babu, 2013). In Dhillon and

Babu's study, conflicts involved physical and verbal provocation which is related to anger and sadness amongst peers. Strategies like apologizing and negotiation are acknowledged by the children. This study has drawn on the positive approach in viewing conflicts as an ideal way to uncover children's views and feelings. Constructive conflict management was implemented and supported by teachers and school counselors where children were aware of healthy strategies such as peer mediation. In relation to persons with disabilities, Kerr (2013) explored the peace process and conflict as one of the needs of persons with disabilities in Northern Ireland. The point is post-conflict peace-building efforts are critical for them in challenging the conflict resolution paradigm in line with the social model of disability for the group of individuals who are often voiceless and marginalized. Hence, understanding conflicts in a positive and constructive approach requires the constant questioning of status quo in our approach in handling conflicts among ourselves, including with and for individuals with learning disabilities.

Based on the five coping styles suggested by Rahim (1983) in the model of conflict resolution, typically, young adults with learning disabilities belong to the avoiding style where they tend to withdraw from conflict and avoid coping with it directly (Eric, John, Boon, Lily, Wim, Ray, Golun and May, personal communication, September 18, 2014). This avoidance strategy implied various causes by and large. Often, they are the target of aggression beyond their inner social sphere for interpersonal conflict (Larkin, et al., 2012). Culturally, it is typical in Asian culture to avoid conflict and to maintain social harmony in a community (Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994). Most families would hold this as their practice to teach their child at home. The argument is how to posit this group of often overlooked and underestimated young adults in embracing their ability for conflict

resolution to achieve the objectives of this study in searching for a more positive and constructive approach beyond cultural factors and arbitration. This raises the issue of conflict management, on the environment perception in relation to the self-advocacy skills, where the issue of self-determination in young adults with learning disabilities is being practiced in making a stance in their lives (Ackerman, 2006). Subsequently, Critical Theory and Social Interdependence Theory can be applied as a possible and sustainable approach in living and supporting these young adults with learning disabilities.

In order to understand the implication and possibilities of conflict resolution for young adults with learning disabilities, it is useful to review ways of management in vocational settings beyond school for this study. Behaviourist intervention based on inappropriate behaviour and humanistic approach within the context of self-advocacy in person centered planning for young adults with learning disabilities are brought up for discussion. Typically, these are the common interventions used in dealing with today's young adults with learning disabilities in vocational settings based on my observation and literature analysis.

### **Behaviourist Intervention**

A public school-university project on Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS) and conflict resolution education (CRE) presented a holistic framework for interdisciplinary practitioners to support all learners including students with special needs in achieving a safe school with proactive and affective instruction of desired behavioural expectation based in student development (Lane-Garon et al., 2012). The essence of its effectiveness lies in the interdisciplinary support in handling conflicts among students in the form of Mentored Peer Mediation. PBIS with its emphasis on emotional connection compliments CRE

which has been incorporated in the school for only two years. The whole school effort in developing its culture in its service resulted in the development of empathy where maturing cognitive perspective taking and socialization to care were achieved and maintained. Hence, promoting positive behaviour offers new insights into the teaching and learning of students, especially those with special needs (Sebag, 2010). Students are given the opportunity to exercise personal control over their own behaviour when the setting is encouraged for growth, self-respect, mutual respect and dignity for all.

In community psychology, the positive behavioural support training model was developed based on an interdisciplinary and collaborative team-building approach to support individuals (Fryxell, 2000). It is a good paradigm shift in handling challenging behaviour with a more environmental and person-centered approach using functional behaviour analysis and future planning to support the unique needs of each individual. Larkin, Jahoda and MacMohan (2013) recommended Social Information Processing model to develop individual tailored intervention working at the cognitive level with individuals with intellectual disabilities who are aggressive and offend. The argument is still on the arbitration of behaviour by the professional and how this would transcend to the community, which is, in this study, the young adults with learning disabilities (Kerr, 2013). How does one view the challenging behaviour displayed, as a means to communicate their anger or otherwise? Is there any opportunity provided to express and communicate their struggles?

Taking the perspective of empowerment of persons with disabilities, Fryxell (2000) concluded there are much to be done in educating the public about disabilities as people take steps to improve the quality of life for this population. Kerr (2013)

critiqued about the imposition of the 'expert' in the field to 'fix' the problem of person with disability has denied their meaningful input and voice. To build an enabling relationship with people with disability, it is critical for us to understand their context of oppression by listening to their voice with the need in a change in relationship between actors. This should challenge our approach in the process of understanding the needs of people with disabilities. In Malaysia, Quek (2013) suggested collaborative counselling approach for career counselling for persons with disabilities to promote inclusiveness in the education and training of career counsellors. The notion of collaboration is being emphasized by listening to the needs of persons with disabilities to achieve sustainability and better social emotional well-being of persons with disabilities.

Typically, behaviourist theorists focused on learning as a function of items such as reinforcement and punishment with the elements of environment as the principal shaping development. This emphasis on measuring behaviour as the goal of development has been critiqued as a single-minded agenda neglecting the ultimate goals of the person's life (Baron & Brown, 1991; Quek, 2013; Whitaker, 2001). It fails to explain the higher processes such as thinking, feeling, analyzing, problem solving, and evaluating in most cases. This poses the need to quest beyond behaviourist theorists in relation to humanistic approach of self-advocacy which views a person holistically within its setting and context (Rix & Matthews, 2014). According to Rix and Matthews (2014), 'learning is fundamentally associated with the context' where the traditional 'psycho-medical' perspective is challenged to evolve in its relevance and effectiveness of support. For instance, the recent research in the use of mindfulness with people with intellectual disabilities has found benefits and effectiveness in managing their stress. This well-accepted programme by people

with intellectual disabilities is based on internal and external stimuli which include sensations, thoughts, feelings, sights, and sounds (Chapman & Mitchell, 2013). This coincides with recognising the role of external factors in adopting a socio-cultural perspective within its context in relation to dealing and managing the 'behaviours' of young adults with learning disabilities towards a more holistic development of the person.

### **Humanistic Approach within the Context of Self-Advocacy**

In taking the position of viewing a person in a holistic manner, it challenges the assumptions of the external factors around the person in practice whilst maintaining the focus upon the person's perspective in context. In relation to this study, the immediate external factor is the role and responsibility of the support staff with their professional and practical knowledge.

Sebag (2010) proposes the need to look into students' self-determination and self-advocacy in understanding themselves for behavior improvement among secondary students with learning disabilities. According to Test, Aspel, and Everson (2006),

*Self-advocacy is a component of the broader concept and approach of self-determination. The concept of self-determination is 'based on the belief that all individuals have the right to direct their lives. It encompasses a broad set of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that enable an individual to seek goals, make decisions, explore options, solve problems, speak up for himself or herself, understand what supports are needed for success, and evaluate outcomes (p.160).*

The notion of self is essential in the impact and effectiveness of self-advocacy skills. This indicates a clear and positive relationship between young adults with learning disabilities and the quality of their lives within its context (Collisson, 2014; Sebag, 2010; Test & Neale, 2004). Taking the perspective of self-advocacy in view of critical conflict education, young adults are taught to see personal

manifestations of oppression in their lives, discuss means of resisting them, and consider plans for doing so (Chapman & Tilley, 2013; Galtung, 2000; Rohwerder, 2013). For instance, in relation to young adults with learning disabilities, instead of discussing bullying generally and teaching them to 'run away', conflict education educates them to practice their rights and peer mediation provides an avenue for them to act against its overt and covert manifestations in their lives based on the knowledge of self in resolving their issues and conflicts, and on their capacity in communications. This approach is recognised as a restorative approach for interdisciplinary perspective on restorative justice (Cremin, Sellman & McCluskey, 2012). The use of restorative questions in conflict resolution has been an effective behaviour management in schools where the feelings of empowerment, emotional literacy and respect among teachers and pupils are built. Ultimately, the implication relates closely with the transformation of a person's life in expounding the creativity in conflict transformation within its context.

For young adults with learning disabilities, the process of conflict has similar characteristics and implications as compared to others. The self-advocacy movement has evolved into a more positive approach in dealing with their behaviour and reaction out of the conflict. This has been observed in the increasing literature on resilience, self-determination, and allowing youth to articulate and self-advocate for themselves in their own language in relation to their self-development despite their experiences of stigma and social exclusion which could have a negative impact over their lives (Larkin, et al., 2012; Singh & Ghai, 2009; Wehmeyer, Bersani, & Gagne, 2000). By allowing the young adults to share their problems according to their experience in a positive approach, this position the focus on their hope and potential

rather than their issues related to disability and conflict. Inevitably, they construct a sense of self-identity and give meaning to their own lives.

This leads to the question of what happens when young adults with learning disabilities become more active as self-advocates in sharing their lives, which include conflicts and its resolutions. The argument is in the notion of constructing their sense of self but not as a person with disruptive behaviours who causes conflict with others (Larkin, et al., 2013; Rohwerder, 2013). The understanding is when young adults with learning disabilities find their own solution to their own problem, it gives way to build their autonomous self. According to Cremin, Sellman and McCluskey, (2012), in achieving restorative justice, the autonomous self needs to be balanced by the human need of interdependence and reciprocity. This highlights the critical need in providing constructive conflict education within its transformative elements which should be applicable to young adults with learning disabilities, ideally all individuals with learning disabilities in relation to the sociological implications for communities.

### **Conceptual Framework of the Study**

The concept of the study derives from the use of self-advocacy skills in young adults with learning disabilities in its implication for practice. In the model of self-advocacy, young adults with learning disabilities are presumed to develop their knowledge of self from young progressively. Subsequently, knowledge of rights becomes critical in their collective living as they develop and build their relationship with one another. It involves a range of communication skills by young adults with learning disabilities when needs are expressed with others for the development of their well-being. It covers from non-verbal communication with body and sign languages to interpersonal and public speaking. The ultimate concept of self-

advocacy is when young adults with learning disabilities able to lead and speak up for themselves as an individual and a collective body. Leadership skills would be demonstrated in their lives when their actions are prominent in guiding and supporting their peers as their knowledge of group's rights is developed besides advocating for others in a sustainable manner.

Adding self-advocacy skills in peer mediation, young adults with learning disabilities would be empowered for skills and qualities including value of facilitation, process of active listening, sense of empathy, spirit of cooperation and experience of empowerment. These qualities are essential in upholding the process of peer mediation for conflict resolution. A conflict is resolved depends on the types of conflicts in different settings. It is influenced by the conflict cycle of each individual and their style of coping historically and at that present of conflict encounter. It brings forth the conflict management approach when a conflict is being handled by peer mediators, in this study, the young adults with learning disabilities. Hence, it is critical for peer mediators to learn and develop such skills in a constructive and progressive manner, not only for them to resolve conflict, but also for the leadership development and holistic well-being of themselves and their peers, including persons who are experiencing conflict, the disputants. As these values and qualities being understood in its implication for practice, the notion of peer mediation for conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities is on its way to be realized based on the research objectives of this study. It becomes a process of transformation when young adults with learning disabilities are able to own and take their liberty to develop their own value, assumptions, and interpersonal relationship skills and leadership development.

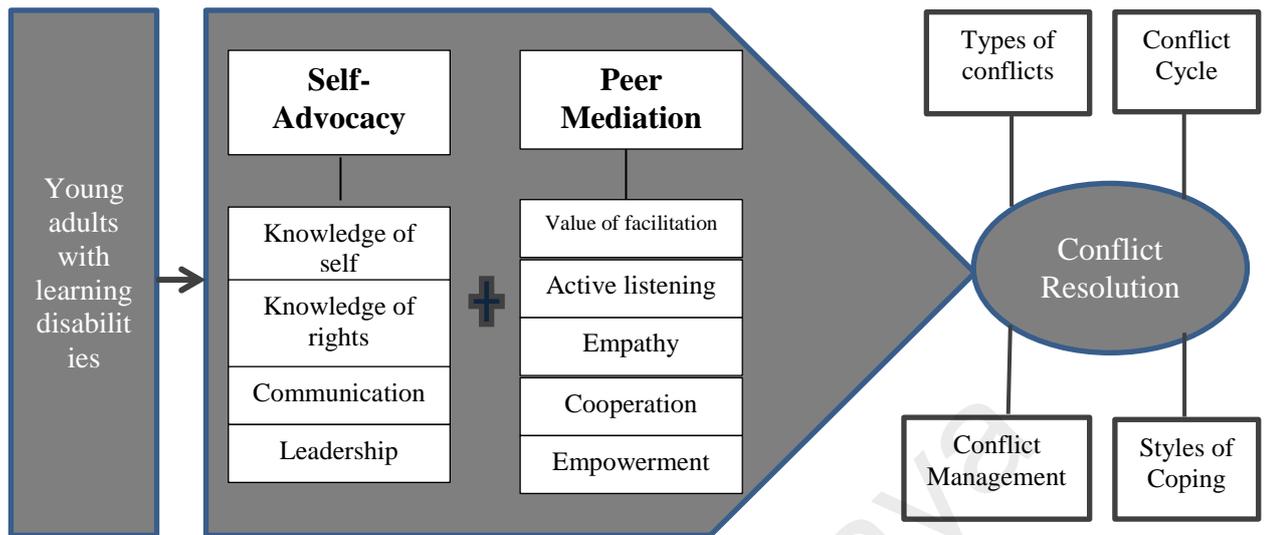


Figure 2.7. Conceptual framework of the study

### Summary

The theoretical approach integrated with the models for this study has provided an appealing basis for peer mediation and conflict resolution to take its position in the oppressed lives towards progressive personal fulfilment of young adults with learning disabilities. The literature reviewed in this section showed that schools are frequently the subject of interventions to reduce, eliminate or resolve conflicts by the abled third party. Often, these are quick fix solutions aimed at specific short-term problems with little attention to educational consequences and long-term cultural and personal transformation beyond the school context. Since there is limited research on peer mediation in special needs population especially beyond the school context, it implies the gap both in literature and practice by young adults with learning disabilities as a support model in the community, particularly in Malaysia. In this regard, I believe this study has been granted an opportunity to make

a significant contribution to current knowledge and practice of the subject matter based on the self-advocacy movement and development.

In the setting of self-advocacy in Malaysia, skills and knowledge learned are seen to expand the young adult's life in a practical term. By providing the avenue for them to speak up their mind and express their emotions and thoughts, listen and review their concerns and conflicts, peer mediation shall enhance their communication skills with each other in a safe space and real setting. Hence, self-advocacy should not be individualized and confined within a particular context with restricted choices. Young adults with learning disabilities should be taught with a broader understanding of their sense of identity and resilience in contributing and building the community (Aspis, 1997; Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006). The implication of peer mediation by young adults with learning disabilities is challenged to include the roles of catalyst by fostering productive dialogue in educating and advocating rather than merely mediating conflicts underpinning the model of self-advocacy and practice (Hansen, 2008). I believe this approach has drawn a new critical framework for conflict resolution practice in enhancing the development of self-advocacy as a cutting edge for a better quality of life in young adults with learning disabilities in our local context.

Integrating positive behavioural support with a humanistic approach in conflict resolution, it challenges our value-laden thinking about young adults with learning disabilities in the area of their conduct when conflict happens. My assertion is that there is a critical interactive relationship between positive behavior and conflict resolution which should enable us to develop a respectful environment. Hence, peer mediation serves its purpose in being proactive and responsive to the needs of the disputants in a supportive and collaborating environment within a

planned and cohesive theoretical framework. It is important that the emphasis is focused on the needs and development of the individuals rather than the conflict, and the role of the support staff and environment in its attempt to improve, support and change when peer mediation takes its position in the interaction process to achieve the impact of self-advocacy, specifically to increase self-determination and self-esteem in the individual for the common good. This is asserted by Armstrong (2002) as a strategy of normalization to make a person valued by the society, hence, change the society's perceptions of them in their contributive roles.

Goodley (2014) urges us to rethink the meaning of the term "human" through disability in the context of fighting and recognizing our rights to reach a point of balance called 'post-human ideal'.

*Disability is in many senses, the quintessential post-human position that necessarily demands interdependent connections with other humans, technologies, non-human entities, communication streams and people and non-peopled networks (p.846).*

The great disparities in power and control are overwhelming for social change unless they are empowered to embrace their identity, roles and responsibilities. It is a process of seeking radical but peaceful social change. Hence, this study proceeds in a collaborative and creative manner to explore the application and impact of self-advocacy, peer mediation and conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities. Chapter Three discusses the research methodology to verify the possibility of peer mediation in action by young adults with learning disabilities.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

My study focuses on using self-advocacy to practice peer mediation for conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities. It serves the purpose of intensifying self-advocacy skills towards leadership skills whilst maintaining a constructivist learning environment among young adults with learning disabilities as a collective body. From the theoretical framework of this study, I argued that peer mediation for conflict resolution would promote shared power, productive dialogue, constructive management of conflict and progressive personal fulfillment in the setting beyond the school context underpinning the model of self-advocacy from oppressed life toward social change. The culture and development of self-advocacy in Malaysia serve as the underpinning approach and long-term development in achieving conflict resolution by young adults with learning disabilities.

I used a qualitative, action research methodology which has participatory and inclusive element, in the form of practitioner research to carry out my study of peer mediation and conflict resolution. This approach is based on my ontological view of human behaviour and epistemological position regarding the study in pursuit of naturalistic inquiry and improving practice (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Paris & Winn, 2014; Stern, Townsend, Rauch & Schuster, 2014). It aims to improve my professional practice by conceptualizing and reflecting about the research problems, collect and analyse research data, and implement changes based on the findings by young adults with learning disabilities as research participants, with a group of

selected young adults with learning disabilities as peer mediators and research partners, and the support staff.

The notion of participatory and inclusive action research is a journey of creating transformative relationship with my research participants and peer mediators specifically when they were invited to participate in the study at their best capacity for the first time as my research partners. Asserted by Chevalier and Buckles (2013), such invitation of people on the margins of society is an exercise of critical consciousness to describe and confront the social, cultural and political reality of their lives. It relates with Critical Theory as a process in generating knowledge, where relevant knowledge is delivered into practice to transform status quo in our social context (Stern, et al., 2014). Self-advocacy is seen as a democratic process to the social movement where young adults with learning disabilities become active citizens in the community.

The argument of Social Interdependence Theory is explicit when the lived experience of young adults with learning disabilities is taking its position. Undoubtedly, it is also a process working towards the promotion of resilience and mutuality where lived experiences of young adults with learning disabilities are explicated and represented (Aldridge, 2014). Argued by Parmenter (2014) in his assertion for inclusion and quality of life in people with learning disabilities where acceptance and opportunity are forged, their sense of well-being is developed. I believe it would make a difference in my professional development in the context of self-advocacy and peer mediation grounded in an interpretative paradigm and constructivism based on the theoretical framework of the study (Cremin, 2007; Stern, et al., 2014). This makes the study iterative throughout the research process of each cycle by constantly asking questions around my personal problems in my

professional practice. This marks the new paradigm shift for me and the young adults with learning disabilities in this participatory action research.

### **Research Design: Action Research**

‘Action research is systematic enquiry *undertaken by and for those taking the action* to improve a social situation, and then made public [italics in original]’ (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). It is now one of the most rapid grow of qualitative enquiry (Gergen, 2009; Stern, et al., 2014). It encompasses educational action and social action which give a sense of well-being and a sense of worthwhile life in the process of enhancing the quality of life experience (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In relation to the objectives of this study in its commencement, peer mediation is believed as a practical change and solution to the conflicts experienced by young adults with learning disabilities. The previously not anticipated additional fourth objective in Cycle 3 has complemented and expounded the ability and potential as their action for social action and social change. It is a means of social movement in generating knowledge and change. It is a process of achieving a sense of holistic well-being, social justice and equality, building quality of relationship and witnessing life transformation for young adults with learning disabilities whilst sustaining its community underpinning Critical Theory, Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory.

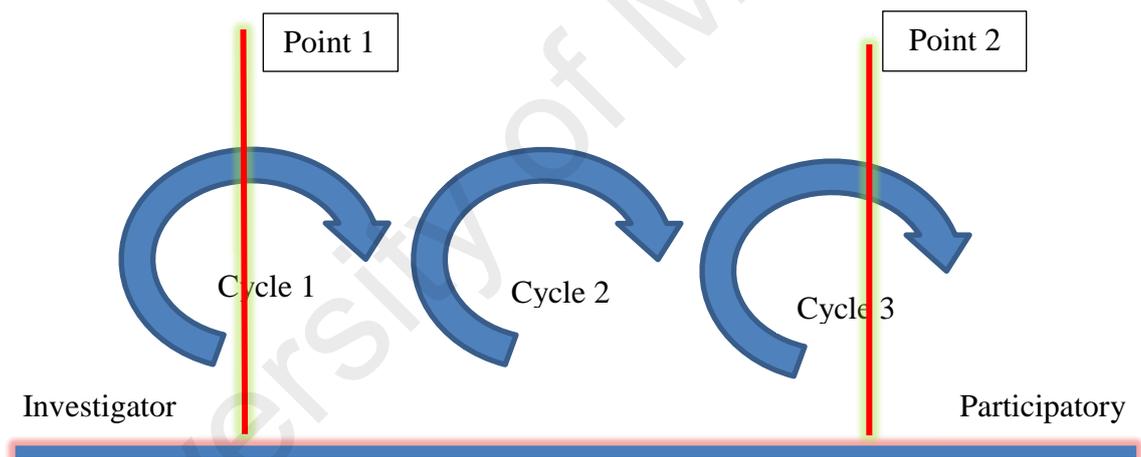
Walmsley and Team, The Central England People First (CEPF) History Project Team were guided by 5 criteria set by Walmsley and Johnson (2003, p.95) when conducting participatory action research or inclusive research to explore the self-advocacy development in England and re-look into its future development (Walmsley & Team, 2014). This includes:

- 1. A research question owned by disabled people;*
- 2. Furthers the interests of disabled people;*
- 3. It is collaborative – disabled people involved in the doing of the work;*
- 4. Some control exercised by disabled people over process and outcomes;*
- 5. Question, reports and outcomes must be accessible to people with learning disabilities.*

In this study, I regarded myself as the practitioner researcher where collaborative learning is expected to take place in the process of improving practice through careful and systematic study. I acted as the outside action researcher and facilitator, to inevitably investigate and influence what was happening within a particular social situation in collaboration with my research participants and research partners to further the agenda in participative enquiry (Gergen, 2009; Stern, et al., 2014). As an outside researcher, I identified my own questions, documented my own observation, analysed and interpreted data according to my own theoretical understandings and purpose in the initial stage of Cycle 1 taking the role as investigator (Figure 3.1). Even though my research question did not own by people with learning disabilities, they have shown their interests and understanding as the study progressed with sufficient and ongoing explanation. The level of participation from young adults with learning disabilities was limited during the conceptual stage.

The process was emergent towards the participation of young adults with learning disabilities when the other criteria were taking its position. The element of ‘participatory’ and ‘inclusive’ took place when the peer mediators furthered their interest and collaborative action in Cycle 1 to improve practice for the following cycles, which are Cycle 2 and Cycle 3. The level of participation was a continuum and progressive moving through and back on the ‘continuum of positionality’ as indicated by the pointer (Figure 3.1). The position of Pointer 1 represented my role and responsibility as investigator at the conceptual stage. It aimed towards shared control with the peer mediators as the project progressed (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

When peer mediators became active participants, the pointer moved to Pointer 2. This represents the ‘voices’ of peer mediators through review meetings, planning meetings, focus group interviews, peer mediation log sheet and their diary. Hence, this gives confidence for the research partners to take on their responsibility. The spirit of collaboration was extended into discussion and reflection about our doubts and insights during group reflection (Gergen, 2009; Greenwood, 2017). We analysed and reflected our data together in Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 where the pointer was positioned in the middle of the continuum and towards the continuum of participatory.



*Figure 3.1.* Continuum of positionality (Herr & Anderson, 2015)

It was a dialectical movement positioning the pointer from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to new action when role changes at a different point (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). The commitment was referred as “reflective rationality” where systematic reflection was carried out through the collection and analysis of empirical data (Stern, et al., 2014). It was critical to note that I regarded them as ‘participant’ and ‘partners’, not ‘objects’ or ‘subjects’ of research (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Stern, et al., 2014). Therefore, they were regarded as active

participants and partners when they shared their experience and views, and learned to provide critical comments in the research process with the quality of support. This process was ongoing as a process, built around cycles of planning, action, reflection and evaluation with added voices, added values, and a more enriched outcome.

The characteristics of being participatory was conceived by Lewin (1946) which has provided legitimacy of *real research* in solving problems and improving practice with practical reasoning and critical social action (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012; Stern, et al., 2014). This attempt is to honour the perspective of young adults with learning disabilities whilst challenging the oppressive conditions at most situations (Aldridge, 2014; Greenwood, 2017). As a practitioner for eighteen years, I am concerned on the development of young adults with learning disabilities as a person in their knowledge transformation and eventually as a collective body in the sustainability of the self-advocacy movement.

Witnessing the limitation of life opportunities in their lives, has urged me to be assertive and creative in my ongoing practice in relation to attain the development of personal knowledge transformation. I believe that this research has contributed to explore what *being creative* means for me in practice, and more critically, it has enhanced my own identity as a practitioner as I commit to share this transformative potential with the stakeholders, not only to enrich their lives, but also my life. Hence, the action research paradigm is believed to offer the possibility of understanding the processes deeply from the ground of my own experience and values, bringing together creative and educational roles for transformation to take place with the element of ‘participatory’ and ‘inclusive’ approaches (Greenwood, 2017; Stack & McDonald, 2014).

The opportunity to bring together personal voice and the voice of the academic community is believed to affirm the choice of action research as practitioner research to take its place (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Stack and McDonald (2014) have provided evidence for the promise and possibility of action research with adults with developmental disabilities in their analysis of action research projects in the UK and US. They recommended that ‘professional researchers continue to grow in their belief in the ability of adults with developmental disabilities to contribute to research, their commitment to providing accommodations to enable full inclusion, and their knowledge of action research and how to achieve its aims’ (p. 89). Described by Chevalier and Buckles (2013) based on Freire’s critical pedagogy, education plays a vital role in promoting radical democracy where the stolen humanity of oppressed people can be recovered through an active process of working alongside them. The argument is how to effectively bring together the role of researcher, practitioner and creative educator as the aim of this participatory action research in the process of reflecting and writing as an agent of change and empowerment towards the transformation of lives in young adults with learning disabilities. This marked the authenticity of this study in knowledge, social and cultural transformation in valid confidence on disability research and studies.

### **Participatory Action Research and Young Adults with Learning Disabilities**

The development of action research in disability research has gained its acceptance following the impact of normalisation and the social model of disability in the late twentieth century (Aldridge, 2014; Chappell, 2000; Porter, Robertson & Lacey, 2004; Strnadova & Cumming, 2014; Walmsley, 2001; Woelders, Abma, Visser & Schipper, 2015). The inclusion of people with learning disabilities in

research projects has provided greater opportunities for them to engage with the research process. As asserted by Woelders et al. (2015), empowerment and normalization are important values in the collaboration with people with learning disabilities. This has inevitably challenged the traditional social research to expand the research horizon into a wider methodological development of learning disability research despite its dilemma by default and design.

Goodley and Moore (2000) have provided a critical reflection when research involving people with 'learning difficulties' was conducted. A radical challenge was drawn upon doing 'participatory' research with people with 'learning difficulties' to achieve the notion of 'giving voice' to research participants and making the research output relevant and applicable to the research participants instead of as a piece of academic paper for publication. This challenges the process of research study with the variety of academic criteria in representing the agendas of people with 'learning difficulties' in a more humanizing approach to research (Paris & Winn, 2014). As the voices of people with learning disabilities are being heard and recognized in this research paradigm, the popularity of participatory action research is affirmed as an enabling journey for the researchers and the community (Porter, Robertson & Lacey, 2004). According to Goodley and Lawthom (2005), it is the vision of the research agenda to posit the identity of researchers and shared notion of community in the research journey.

The journey of participatory action research continues to expand its shared learning within learning disability research despite its challenges. The lives of people with learning disability get published and presented in world congress (McClimens, 2008; Walmsley & Team, 2014). The 'insider perspective' of people with learning disabilities contributed has provided a meaningful participation in decision-making

processes for young people with learning disabilities besides raising their self-confidence and self-esteem (Kellett, Aoslin, Baines, Clancy, Jewiss-Hayden, Singh & Strudgwick, 2010). Other reflections on doing inclusive research with people with learning disabilities has highlighted the importance of collaborative research relationship with its commitment and responsibilities (Bigby & Frawley, 2010; Chapman et al., 2011; Iriarte, O'Brien, & Chadwick, 2014; Keyes & Brandon, 2012; Kramer, Kramer, Garcia-Iriarte, & Hammel, 2011; O'Brien, McConkey, & Garcia-Iriarte, 2014; Ollerton & Horsfall, 2013; Stack & McDonald, 2014; Walmsley & Team, 2014). The impact of participating in the research process has been empowering the lives of these young people leading to positive social change in the midst of its challenges.

It is believed to be a process of emancipation of self through social empowerment in enhancing pleasure, creativity, democratic participation and shared responsibility (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). The ideology of 'nothing about us without us' is on the way to be realized in achieving full inclusion in all aspects of community life (Stack & McDonald, 2014; Woelders, et al., 2015). In fact, the notion of *rights to research* has operationalized the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* from the human rights perspective to understand disability (Ollerton & Horsfall, 2013). This has provided a powerful tool with a highly successful means to promote social change and achieve full inclusion. However, the "Rights Approach" is argued by Parmenter (2014) in its limitation to counteract exclusion in its application in different cultural heritages among countries of the world. Despite all the effort made by the local government in its service deliveries, the challenges remain when their voices are unheard, in particular, people with learning disabilities. Asserted by Greenwood (2017), such social injustice and

inequities of power could be broken down with the awareness of positionality with vigilance towards one's own power when their voices are being heard and recognised in mutual respect amidst diversities of individuals.

In Malaysia, participatory action research has not been practiced in disability studies and research. Recognising the development of self-advocacy and its impact, I believe this has challenged my commitment to undertake the study using this methodology, to promote the agenda of people with 'learning disabilities' as much as they were being 'marginalised' by the community, including the researchers generally. The argument highlights the urgency to fill the gap between theory and practice where the direction to research, in this study, to be 'bottom up' located in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities themselves. Ultimately, asserted by Goodley and Moore (2000) and Parmenter (2014), understanding the social, economic, material and cultural conditions of disability should be the main agenda for academic researcher in contributing to the emancipation of people with 'learning disabilities'. Witnessing them being developed as self-advocates and leaders has laid the foundation for them to take charge and improve the support system. Hence, asserted by Paris and Winn (2014), 'research is reclaimed as an indelible right of all people as a tool that they can use to transform the conditions of their lives' (p.78). This requires their responsibility for action in a progressive and definite term.

As a social practitioner and researcher, I have access to the data rich environment of the programme and the length of time with the participants to employ the methods of participatory action research. My pedagogical practices are based on systematic, intentional questioning, reflection and action, including the act of implementing peer mediation for conflict resolution. Peer mediation training was conducted for peer mediators, and with consent, peer mediators were asked and

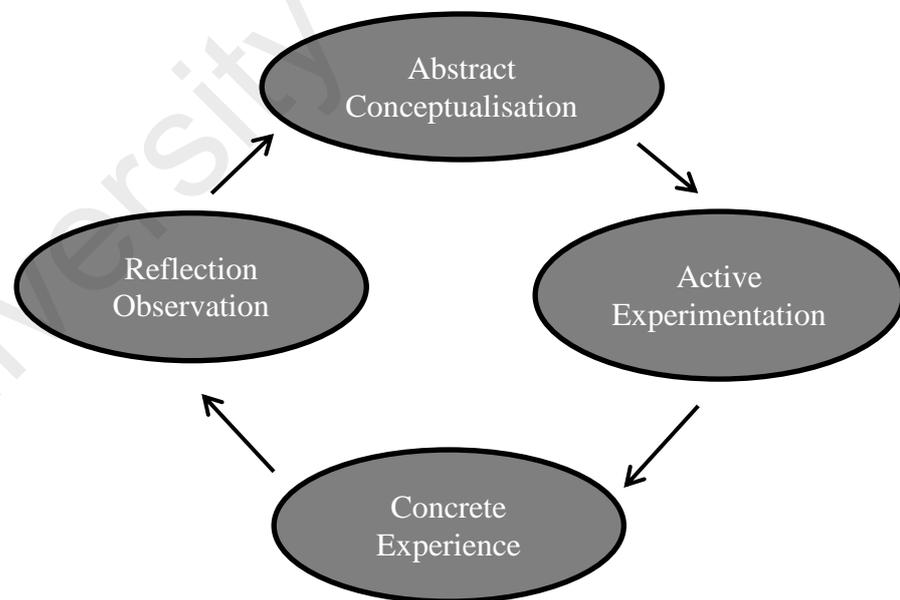
invited to participate in contributing their insights during the research process as my research partners. It is critical to note that this is not an imposition, but an invitation.

The point is in empowering peer mediators and research partners to change and improve, creative learning goes far beyond the educational context in the research paradigm. It is seen as a capacity to live in the society and respond to its challenges and changes (Dustman, Kohan & Stringer, 2014; Greenwood, 2017; Stack & McDonald, 2014; Woelders et al., 2015). Asserted by Stack & McDonald (2014) about the benefits and feasibility of action research with young adults with learning disabilities despite its challenges, I believe this methodology has provided the opportunity to support the young adults with learning disabilities' potential of learning underpinning the model of self-advocacy, the rights approach with the ideology of 'nothing about us without us' in relation to the objectives of the study evolved from the initial objectives and questions.

### **Process of Action Research in My Study**

Following the objectives of this study in Chapter One, there are three main actors in my study: young adults with learning disabilities as peer mediators and research partners (selective), research participants, and the support staff (Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1). The main actor for this study is the peer mediators, supported by the other young adults with learning disabilities and the support staff in the real setting for conflict resolution. Due to the decision to embark on a participatory action research, the peer mediators were acknowledged as my 'partners' throughout the process (Stern, et al., 2014). This means they were given opportunity to make observation during the study, contribute their insights, analyse the data and plan for the next action upon their capacity of understanding and learning in a cyclical process as in the four core elements in Kolb's learning cycle (Figure 3.2).

The whole action research was acted out into three cycles integrated with Kolb's learning cycle of thinking by conceptualizing the role of peer mediators, doing peer mediation as an active experimentation and feeling as a concrete experience as peer mediators, and observing in the form of reflection in each cycle (Reilly, 2013). I believe this experiential learning approach would create a long lasting experience for them besides offering them a fuller perspective on the topics and practice. Research conducted by Cremin (2002) and Bodtker (2001) in their conflict education for special needs population have seen its effectiveness and practicality of education and training. For this study, this means they would directly apply what they have learned, seen and heard upon our collaborative and reflective learning throughout the study.



*Figure 3.2. Kolb's learning cycle*

**Cycle one.** Conceptualisation of research problem has taken its position during the writing of this proposal to commence Cycle 1. The sample content for Peer Mediation (PM) training (Appendix A1) and Understanding My Emotion (U+Me) training (Appendix B1) was planned and drafted based on my field experience and different resources according to its topics. I conducted both trainings consecutively as the facilitator actively experimenting the training programme based on the model of self-advocacy in relation to recognizing their sense of well-being in practicing peer mediation for conflict resolution.

In week one, peer mediators were trained with new skills, facilitating communication, active listening skills, analytical skills, critical thinking skills and collaboration among each other underpinning the model of self-advocacy, peer mediation and conflict resolution in PM training. This was conducted in an intensive six-day training, with a total of 28 hours of experiential learning for peer mediators using Kolb's learning cycle. It was important to help the group feel relaxed with the idea of peer mediation explicitly and participatory research implicitly. Based on the model of self-advocacy, peer mediators were able to learn to communicate and have qualities of relationship and leadership through the activities of understanding self and others in handling conflicts. Experiential learning included observation skills, making records, practical sessions with review and reflection skills which put principles into practice as their concrete experience as part of the training.

In week two, U+Me training focused on self-awareness and expression of feelings besides exploring the understanding of research participants on the roles of peer mediators. There are five sessions with a total of five and a half hours, each with its aims and activities. I facilitated this training whilst peer mediators were asked to observe the implementation based on the observation protocol (Appendix L).

From week three to week six, peer mediation was in action in the real setting when conflicts happened among young adults with learning disabilities. Peer mediators conducted their observation in the daily operation before any conflicts in their field notes. Peer mediators were expected to mediate any conflicts happen in the setting and make records after peer mediation session. Peer mediators and I experienced the knowing-in-action through peer mediation. Research participants were guided to apply what they have learned in **U+Me** training to express their conflict during peer mediation.

This formed the basis for us to reflect upon our observations in week seven and week eight during individual interview with the research participants, focus group interview and group reflection with the peer mediators and research partners and support staff. Interviews were conducted based on the interview protocol (Appendix N1) where participants were asked and guided to understand and answer the questions accordingly. All were able to answer the questions according to their capacity with support. Much of the learning took place using interactive methods. Peer mediators were encouraged to give one another space to speak, to express their views, to listen, to question one another's perspective constructively during group reflection and review, followed by focus group interview. The content and practicality of peer mediation were being emphasized at this stage. Another focus group interview was conducted with the support staff to triangulate the data from our observation field notes and documents. I played my role as investigator extensively at this stage.

The skills learned in **PM** training were anticipated to be useful for the peer mediators to play a more active participation during practice and reflection. Reflection was done freely and informally in the initial stage, and it was a process

led to participatory action (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Fox, Martin & Green, 2007). Cycle 1 concluded with a team analysis of all available data to date in week eighth to week tenth as provisional concepts, in order to identify implications for peer mediation in action, and use the findings to shape the focus of the next research cycle. The first draft of a peer mediators' training manual and peer mediation visual script based on peer mediation script (Appendix C1) commenced at the end cycle of Cycle 1. Cycle 1 contained ten weeks with its activities depicted in Table 3.1. Some photos were provided in Appendix U on the process of this action research.

Table 3.1

*Timeline for Cycle 1*

Timeline	Content	Activities	Action by	Target group of people
Week 1	<b>PM</b> training	28-hour experiential learning	Researcher/Facilitator	Peer mediators
Week 2	<b>U&amp;Me</b> training	5 sessions, 5½-hour group learning	Researcher/Facilitator	All research participants and support staff
Week 3 - 6	Peer mediation in action	Peer mediation	All in real setting	All actors of the study
Week 7 - 8	Review	Focus group review	Researcher	Peer mediators and support staff
Week 9 – 10	Planning for next cycle	Focus group planning	Researcher & Peer mediators	Peer mediators and researcher

**Cycle two.** Data collected in Cycle 1 served its purpose to improve the **PM** training and **U&Me** training. Based on what was observed and reflected by the peer mediators, the support staff and I, action was taken to improve the practice. Lesson learned in Cycle 1 was re-organised in Cycle 2 constructively. Due to the unforeseen re-structured programme in the centre, Cycle 2 took a total of 16 weeks to complete. A total of 30-hour **PM** training was conducted within the first 4 weeks.

The content of PM training was improved with more in-depth skills development activities or games, with increased level of participation from peer mediators towards the development of research skill. For instance, peer mediators were asked to plan and write out their activity plan for U+Me training and practice as co-facilitator in the training. U+Me training was conducted in 2 batches in week 7 and week 12. Research participants remained the same as Cycle 1. Peer mediators were given the opportunity to volunteer by rotation to lead the games. I remained as the facilitator for U+Me training and peer mediators were expected to be more rigorous in their observation and action.

It is important to note that peer mediation was ongoing carried forward from Cycle 1 on daily basis, but in Cycle 2, the research participants and peer mediators were assumed to be more assured of their needs and roles after another round of training adapting to their needs. It is a process of knowledge and cultural transformation for the practice and research setting. The content of participatory research was highlighted more in this cycle. Interview protocol used in Cycle 1 (Appendix N1) was reviewed with the research partners. It then was used (Appendix N2) to conduct the interview with the research participants in Centre U. They were briefed about the procedure before interview. Research partners were encouraged to be more critical in their observation and reflecting their practice besides listening, speaking and questioning one another. Support staff were expected to continue provide their support with reduced level of support intentionally to enhance the model and practice of self-advocacy in young adults with learning disabilities.

The peer mediators' training manual and peer mediation visual script (Appendix C2) based on peer mediation script (Appendix C1) were finalized and printed for practical use as the support staff were expected to reduce their level of

support in the following cycle. Cycle 2 ended with our decision to share our knowledge about peer mediation with other self-advocacy groups. Letter was drafted and sent to the self-advocacy groups via e-mail with excitement.

Table 3.2

*Timeline for Cycle 2*

Timeline	Content	Activities	Action by	Target group of people
Week 1-4	<b>PM</b> training	30-hour experiential learning with improved activities/games	Researcher/ Facilitator	Peer mediators
Week 5 – 6	Preparation for <b>U&amp;Me</b> training	Plan and write activity plan	Peer mediators	Peer mediators
Week 7/ Week 12	<b>U&amp;Me</b> training	6 sessions, 6-hour group learning & participation with improved activities/games	Researcher/ Facilitator & Peer mediators	All research participants and support staff
Week 1 – 16	Peer mediation in action	Peer mediation	All in real setting	All actors of the study
Week 13 – 14	Review	Focus group review	Researcher	Peer mediators and support staff
Week 15 – 16	Planning for next cycle	Focus group planning	Researcher & Peer mediators	Peer mediators and researcher

**Cycle three.** Peer mediation training shifted its focus to other self-advocacy groups in the Klang Valley suggested by the research partners. Upon discussion and agreement, invitations were sent via email by them (Appendix Q) to four identified self-advocacy groups after we agreed with the criteria and drafted a letter (Appendix R). Follow-up phone calls and emails were made for attendance confirmation. Peer mediators were given opportunity to review the training content. We agreed to conduct **PM** training in week 1 for 20 hours over 3 days using the

existing materials. Research partners suggested to emphasise on practical training with experiential approach as what they have learned in Cycle 1 and 2. They agreed and were confident to conduct **U4Me** training with the new peer mediators in the employment centre which agreed to participate. Roles were discussed and practiced during **PM** training. The existing peer mediators used their activity plan to conduct **U4Me** training whilst the new peer mediators from other self-advocacy group were asked to support the training. **U4Me** training was conducted in 3-day with a total of 6 hours in week 3.

Peer mediation in action remained ongoing throughout Cycle 3 in the existing centre. **U4Me** training was absorbed into the daily debriefing session at the end of the day as a recap activity. The 'voice' of peer mediators became more prominent at this stage with their active involvement in peer mediation. Added role as research partners were agreed as a step of empowerment learning in doing research. Research objectives and research questions were explained and reviewed with their participation with the additional fourth research question. This included learning and re-designing interview questions for research participants and support staff based on the research questions in week seven and eight. It was followed by interviewing the research participants about their experiences of peer mediation (Appendix N3). Interviews were also conducted to the support staff in understanding their position in peer mediation as they were expected to fade off their support. The process of data collection has evolved from the previous cycles.

It took us 14 weeks to complete Cycle 3 (Table 3.3). Time was spent encouraging research partners to reflect on their learning, share their views and experiences of doing research in week 9 to week 14. This was done through rigorous

observation, field note taking and reflective diary writing. This cycle was extended to week fourteen as the inclusive research was taking its position actively after individual interviews were conducted by the research partners. At week nine and fourteen, all recorded interview verbatim was transcribed by the research partners followed by data analysis as a team. A long-term plan was discussed for **PM** training and **U&Me** training during monthly staff meeting.

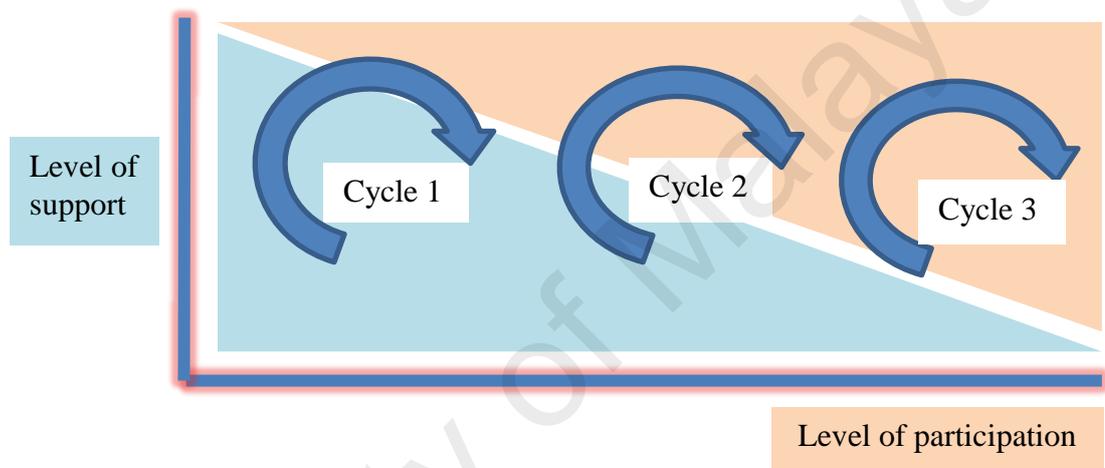
Table 3.3

*Timeline for Cycle 3*

Timeline	Content	Activities	Action by	Target group of people
Week 1	<b>PM</b> training	20-hour experiential learning & participation with varied activities/games	Researcher/ Facilitator & Peer mediators	New peer mediators & existing peer mediators
Week 3	<b>U&amp;Me</b> training	3 sessions, 6-hour group learning with varied activities/games	Peer mediators	All research participants and support staff
Week 1 – 14	Peer mediation in action	Peer mediation	Peer mediators	All actors of the study
Week 7 – 8	Review & action	Individual interviews Focus group review	Researcher & research partners	Peer mediators and support staff
Week 9 – 14	Inclusive research in action	Transcribing, Data analysis Focus group planning	Researcher & research partners	Research partners and researcher

The process of this action research in relation to the level of participation of peer mediators and research partners with the intention to be increased from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3 is depicted in Figure 3.3. This is a process to achieve a theory of learning

called *knowledge transformation* (Paris & Winn, 2014; Stern, et al., 2014). This theory poses the idea that learning which is ‘educational’ and ‘creative’ leads to change of both the learner and what is learned. As the level of participation increases in the peer mediators as learners, the level of support required from researcher, facilitator and support staff shall decrease gradually. This process of learning involves the capacity to respond to adversity and challenge, self and other; and leads to positive change in the learner in a holistic manner practically and experientially.



*Figure 3.3.* Level of participation & support

Besides, ongoing reflection skill as a way of understanding and monitoring the learning cycle were developed and demonstrated with the possible outcome of understanding oneself and the impact on the research experience (Fox, Martin & Green, 2007). I, as the practitioner researcher, together with my research partners, have taken the position to understand our different position on the continuum and made sense of the effect of it as our collaborative learning. It is critical for me as the researcher and facilitator to be aware of the capability and readiness of peer mediators when support is needed and intentionally decreased. I believe the experiential learning of peer mediation training has provided an avenue for peer mediators to achieve self-reliance with the real meaning of self-advocacy towards

their participation in this inclusive research. This includes a better knowledge of self and knowledge of rights in its application, with a more meaningful communication language and leadership dynamics.

Throughout my working experiences with young adults with learning disabilities, I have observed their motivation and enthusiasm sink due to behavior management and stifled socialization. On the other hand, they are motivated and enthusiastic when learning opportunities are given. It is common to observe them gaining their self-confidence positively especially on guided and increased participation of this project with collaborative interactions among peers and the support staff. This is the reason of my belief for self-advocacy approach that they need choice, communication and collaboration. I believe that when learning transforms knowledge, it goes beyond the context of learning and transfers into other life roles and skills, such as leadership skills.

For young adults with learning disabilities, through their participation in this study, I am convicted to witness the knowledge transformation taking place when knowledge is visibly transformed in their life and their understanding. They have exercised their self-determination and self-advocacy skills to do something new, in the scope of knowledge in their mind followed by subsequent action in their personal life in realizing their human potential through the process of reflexivity. This has been proven when the level of participation is being executed and supported during the action learning at Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 in achieving the research objectives through the dynamic of reflexivity.

## **Sample of the Study**

This study continues to describe the selection criteria for peer mediators, research partners, research participants and support staff as the actors of the study. The context and dynamic of the Employment Centre named Centre U are described to provide understanding about the experiences and relationships of young adults with learning disabilities in the real setting. In most cases, they spent the most time in the centre besides their homes where conflicts bound to happen.

### **Selection Criteria for Peer Mediators and Research Partners**

As the main actors in this study, purposive sampling was used to select peer mediators with the intention to hear their voice from the most knowledgeable source related to the research area (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2015). Peer mediators were selected based on their years of involvement and experiences in self-advocacy skills besides their cognitive understanding. In order to ensure that they were able to take on the responsibility as peer mediator, they were required to have at least one year of experience in the practice of self-advocacy skills, and actively representing and participating in the organization awareness programme related to self-advocacy movement and development in Malaysia such as Disability Equality Training (Malaysia, Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2016). Peer mediators needed to have fair knowledge of self, for example, to know own strength and preferences, learning style and support needs.

A pre-selection screening was conducted prior to understand their commitment and consent. Knowledge on personal rights was an added knowledge prior to peer mediation. The skill of being a good team player with good learning attitude and potential was expected to provide a good learning experience for them too. Consent was obtained with details of the expectation, commitment and protocol

on top of interest in research (Stack & McDonald, 2014). In summary, there were five criteria for the selection of peer mediators:

1. at least one year of self-advocacy experience;
2. active in practicing and promoting self-advocacy;
3. fair knowledge of self and knowledge of rights;
4. good team player with good learning attitude and potential; and
5. agreeable to be committed to this study.

The same criteria applied for the selection of research partners in this study based on my observation and their commitment. Peer mediators received a verbal explanation about the research project with an informed consent form (Appendix D). A signed informed consent form was presented to the researcher as evidence of their commitment. It was my responsibility to ensure the maximum capacity of the peer mediators' understanding of the information of the research project which included a clear set of expectation and what is involved in taking part (Porter et al., 2004). Three peer mediators, two female and one male have been recommended and agreed to participate in this study. The following is detailed information about each of them.

**Peer mediator 1 (Wynn).** Wynn is a 36-year-old female who has been working in Centre U for the past twelve years. She came from special integrated class in mainstream school. She is the one of the supervisors with learning disabilities overseeing the daily production. She has been actively involved with self-advocacy activities since she joined the organization. Her experience in self-advocacy and in Centre U has granted her confidence in understanding and relating to the members of the organization.

Ms Wynn agreed to participate in this study with the hope to learn more skills. In Cycle 1, she was confused with the new skills she was learning especially on parts

which needed her to write in English. She has difficulty to spell and write in proper English. During peer mediation training, she tried to do her worksheets by asking other support staff to help her. During peer mediation, she showed confidence in following the process and gained her experience through practice. She tried to record her observation and write her diary with much encouragement from me. I could read and understand the way of her writing upon knowing and talking to her. She shared her confusion at the end of Cycle 1 to the team. She started to understand her roles as a peer mediator during peer mediation training at Cycle 2. She shared her challenges as one of the research partners in learning inclusive research when the demand of literacy and writing was prominent. She tried her best to contribute her critical views. Her high commitment has sustained her to be the research partners in this study.

**Peer mediator 2 (Maelyn).** Maelyn is a 25-year-old female who joined Centre U in 2014 as an administrative staff. She attended mainstream education and went through brain surgery when she was 17 year-old which has caused her learning disability since then. She showed good effort in learning about herself during peer mediation training. She tried her best to practice what she has learned even though she often described herself as ‘forgetful’ due to her brain surgery. The inclusive research learning was another milestone for her besides peer mediation. Due to her limited exposure in life, she acknowledged her own limitation and tried to improve herself. She is opened to comments in improving herself. Her willingness and openness to learn about participatory action research has provided the opportunity as another research partner.

**Peer mediator 3 (Joe).** Joe is a 39-year-old male who joined Centre U in 2014 as assistant supervisor. He attended mainstream school with typical education system in Malaysia. Since joining the centre, he was given opportunity to

learn and participate in self-advocacy promotion and training. Prior to his past working experience in the open employment, he joined the organization with hope to know himself better and be accepted by his peers. He has fair knowledge of self in the beginning of the research study, but realized he has much to learn and improve during peer mediation training in Cycle 1. He was given opportunity to reflect upon himself though he struggled with that throughout the process. He was guided closely by me to constantly check himself based on his personal journal. He started to show some improvement in Cycle 2 and Cycle 3. Due to the overwhelming commitment as a research partner whilst going through his personal development and issues, he did not join the inclusive research as the research partner in Cycle 3. He acknowledged he was not ready for it after some trials at Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. His comments in Cycle 1 and 2 were acknowledged with appreciation.

Other criteria include good family support from the peer mediators and research partners. This means the family was informed via the consent form signed by peer mediators. Peer mediators were requested to explain their involvement in the project as part of self-advocacy skills enhancement and parents were expected to render all necessary support such as transportation needs, besides understanding the project rationale in making it a meaningful experience for the young adult with learning disabilities. I, as the researcher and facilitator for the training, made intentional effort and full commitment to stand alongside the peer mediators and the research partners.

In Cycle 3, four peer mediators, two males and two females from two local self-advocacy groups, Centre C and Centre D, joined the **PM** training based on the same selection criteria. An invitation letter was sent to their support staff via email to join the project (Appendix R). The support staff were given explanation via tele-

conversation about the research project and the selection criteria. All of them were given a verbal explanation about the research project with a returned signed consent form to the main researcher on the first day of training (Appendix D).

### **Selection Criteria for Research Participants and Support Staff**

All members at the Centre U were included in the research project in the real setting. With the intention to practice inclusion for the study, convenience sampling is utilized within the centre (Fraenkel et al., 2015). There were three full time support staff and a Lead Coordinator overseeing the daily operation of Centre U. One full time support staff, a member of the organization as young adult with learning disabilities, was selected as the peer mediators. Another two support staff served their role in supporting and referring disputants to peer mediators in Cycle 1. In January 2016, a new Employment Coordinator joined the centre and agreed to participate in this study. One support staff as the Employment Coordinator and the Lead Coordinator took part in Cycle 2. In Cycle 3, 5 support staff were included. They were 2 support staff, Employment Coordinator, Lead Coordinator and a volunteer support staff (Table 3.4).

Members at Centre U were given an informed consent form (Appendix E) in addition to the visual explanation of the research process in handout format (Appendix F) to participate in the research project. I contacted their parents and/or caregivers and requested their consent to understand the purpose of the research project and to render necessary support to the young adults with learning disabilities. In the case of any objection by the parent, the voice of young adults with learning disabilities to be included in the research project was reconsidered, and decision was made based on the voice of young adults with learning disabilities. It was my hope to be able to respect the young adults in this study who are over the age of 18, as adults

with the same rights as other adults without disabilities (Morgan, Cuskelly & Moni, 2014). This collaborates with my strong conviction in promoting self-advocacy and human rights throughout the study, to critically queer us to re-think their status as consenting adults. Hence, visual explanation was given to achieve maximum understanding, and explanation was expected to be repeated for them to receive clearance before they can participate in the study. Support staff were given an informed consent form (Appendix G). Upon agreement to participate, research participants and support staff signed the consent form and returned to the researcher.

In Cycle 1, there were a total of 27 members in Centre U. 19 members signed their consent to participate in the study as research participants. 8 members did not sign the consent form, where 6 expressed no interest to participate in the study, whilst 2 were absent during the briefing and training. These 8 members did not join **U+Me** training.

In Cycle 2, due to the re-structure of the daily operation, **U+Me** training was conducted over two rounds in two months, 9 members in first month and 17 in the following month. 2 members pulled out from the project due to their employment commitment. 15 members were included.

In Cycle 3, three members rejoined Centre U with one new member, made a total of 19 members continued in the study. A summary of the research participants' details with the categories of learning disabilities, their level of support required and their participation at the 3 cycles could be referred at Appendix T. The level of support was determined by the supervisors of the operation based on the research participants' personal needs and work performance. Research participants (RP) are coded into number to protect the identity of the actors of the study. The re-structured programme in December 2015 has caused RP#5, RP#11 and RP#16 to miss out their

involvement in Cycle 2. However, they are included in Cycle 3 when they re-joined the setting. RP#13 decided to leave the study due to her personal medical condition. RP#19, RP#23 and RP#25 decided to pull out from the study due to their work placement in the open employment. RP#28, RP#29, RP#30 and RP#31 joined the study in February 2016 under the Transition Training and agreed to join the study as research participants. All research participants have played their role well in this research setting accordingly.

In Centre D, 17 members among a total of 50 members joined **U+Me** training facilitated by the peer mediators from Centre U in their setting. All of them was explained about the research process by the researcher (Appendix F) and signed the consent form in bi-lingual format, English and Bahasa Malaysia (Appendix E). The research partners and I agreed to maintain their data as a group except the peer mediators. One support staff from Centre D was included. It was a good learning experience for the peer mediators to learn about other self-advocacy groups and their development. The findings from research participants, peer mediators and support staff from Centre D were included in Chapter 4.

As for the support staff as the third group of actors in the study, their demographic is depicted in Table 3.4 by their gender, age, years of working experience with young adults with learning disabilities, and their involvement in the study in 3 cycles. Support staff U, N, P, M and K were from Centre U. I did not enforce their involvement as I decided to trust in the natural setting for their involvement in this study as consented. Hence, the involvement was based on their responsibility at work and the attendance during interview at the end of the cycle. G was from Centre D where he participated in **PM** training and **U+Me** training in Cycle 3.

Table 3.4

*Support Staff*

SS	Gender	Age (as at 2016)	Years of working experience	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
U	Female	54	3	√	√	NA
N	Female	64	7	√	NA	√
P	Male	48	1	NA	√	√
M	Female	41	10	NA	√	√
K	Female	32	5	NA	NA	√
G	Male	61	10	NA	NA	√

The actors of the study have participated well in this study at their capacity amidst the challenges. It was a good learning opportunity for all of us. This included I, as the practitioner researcher, the main facilitator for the research study. I count it a privilege to be able to learn together with all the actors. I would let the findings speak for itself in Chapter 4. Findings are presented based on the research questions. It is triangulated with data from the peer mediators, support staff and I, as the practitioner researcher.

**Location and Setting of the Study**

Centre U is located at Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. It was formed in 2003 with the intention to employ people with learning disabilities who are not able to hold a job in a competitive employment setting. Their core business is card-making, weaving, and baking. They received good support from the community in terms of equipment and sales of their products. They work together as a team to accomplish the demands for sales. They were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning with appropriate support from the support staff. They lived interdependently for assistance and support as a learning community. All are respected as individuals in their own rights, with their own ability to work, some needing individual support.

I approached Centre U and explained to them about the objectives of the study. My voluntary involvement of Centre U in this study has highlighted their openness in accepting new ideas which aimed to make an impact in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. With much enthusiasm, the management committee and the support staff showed interest and expectation. They agreed to participate by providing time and resources in learning and implementing peer mediation.

In January 2015, a transition programme was introduced to the organisation to prepare members to work in the competitive employment setting. Members who joined the transition programme have their practical training in Centre U before they were matched and recommended with jobs in the open employment.

In Cycle 1, there were 27 members working in Centre U from Monday to Thursday. Out of 27 members, 21 members were paid for their contribution and receive monthly salary based on their work performance and attendance. Members in the transition programme did not receive any allowance. Due to various reasons such as health issues and family commitment, some members only work for two days whilst others three or four days in a week. It has created a sense of dignity in their lives to be able to work despite their level of support needed due to the severity of their learning differences. They enjoyed working as a team. At times, conflicts happened due to personality differences and individual temperament. Types of conflicts include misunderstanding, name calling, disturbing and bullying.

In December 2015, Centre U was closed down for a month. The staff team and the committee members decided to take the one month period to re-structure the programme to benefit more members in the future. It gave the opportunity for the staff to re-planned new products for the daily operation and revamped a new setting.

A more structured and individual-based plan for the employment setting and each member was carried out. The core business has been re-structured to weaving, sewing and baking. However, the transition programme remained status quo. The closure of the centre has caused the delay of the project as all staff were required to plan for the new programme and expected with new responsibilities.

In January 2016, 21 paid members were called back batch by batch to resume their new work skills and responsibilities. This has caused the drop of member participation in Cycle 2 for U+Me training. However, the delay of the project has given more opportunity for the peer mediators to reflect on what they have learned in Cycle 1 and prepare for Cycle 2 in a new beginning year.

Self-advocacy skills were observed and practiced when they are given opportunity to speak for their needs or on behalf of their friends, and made their own choices with appropriate guidance at times. Communication was encouraged when they were included in the decision making process of the daily production, whenever possible. Typically, they were given choices to speak to one another during work time. In reality, they needed support from third party or other communication cues to communicate to their friends. Their modes of communications ranged from one-to-two-word speech, sounds, gestures and speeches. During lunch break, they were given opportunity to buy their own food and choose their leisure activities but some choose to be alone. They ended their days with circle time, to report to each other about their work for the day but not about their emotions and feelings. It was always the hope to have the work place pleasant and comfortable for everyone. Conflicts usually happened during work time and they were being handled by the support staff most of the time and parents were called in if need to.

It was important to note their interest in coming to work. I used to ask the young adult, “What is the one thing you like coming here?” “...friends.” And they continued to name their good friends and omitted friends they used to have conflicts and misunderstandings unless being prompted. For friends they did not like, they answered, “I don’t like her...” The process of inquiry has encouraged them to express their preference in making friends. On the other hand, it was not uncommon to note conflicts among themselves. Misunderstandings, name calling, arguing and fights were among the common conflicts happened in this centre (Nancy, personal communication, 27 October, 2014). This set the real setting for the research project to take its position.

The involvement of Centre D in Cycle 3 was taken place in Kajang, Selangor. It is formed under a service organization which runs job training and employment programme for its members since 1995. Their nature of training programme focuses more in contracted jobs besides independent living skills development. The operation staff commented the types of common conflicts happened in the centre included bullying, miscommunication and misunderstanding (Jinn, personal communication, 9 May 2016). The management of the centre decided that their members were not ready for the implementation of peer mediation even after sending two peer mediators for PM training and permitted the members to learn about U+Me training (Ming, personal communication, 20 June 2016). Hence, peer mediation did not follow through in Centre D.

The similarity of conflicts described by young adults with learning disabilities was noted in both centres, such as misunderstanding. It is essential to note such conflict to be typical between persons without disabilities in any community

setting. In this case, such conflict happened between young adults with learning disabilities is not solely due to the results of having a learning disability.

### **Instruments of the Study**

The primary data collected for this study came from training plans consisted of **PM** training and **U4Me** training from peer mediators, research participants and supporting staff as the actors. Other instruments included observation protocol, interview protocol and documents using observation, interviews and document analysis throughout the study (Figure 3.6).

### **Training Plan**

**Peer mediation (PM) training.** I designed the content for **PM** training and conducted it to the peer mediators based on my experience and the model of self-advocacy with the emphasis on communications and leadership skills and the model of peer mediation. References for the content were referred and adapted to the ability and understanding of young adults with learning disabilities (Greeff, 2005; Sellman, 2009). Permissions were granted from the author and publisher of reference (Appendix I1 and I2).

The training content in **PM** training involved self-awareness, active listening, critical thinking and reflection skills which I believe was advantaged to support their learning process as they were invited to participate in the data collection and data analysis (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). This involved the act of asking questions and seeking answers as an intervention to improve practices. It provided opportunity for peer mediators to reflect and self-evaluate the practices critically and deliberately as a basis for future action and application. The inevitable effect of intervention and the subsequent potential for change were expected with the involved participants during

the search of improved practices. This creates possibilities for the ownership of the research, the extent of sharing control, power to make decision about the research and the research outcomes (O'Brien et al., 2014; Stack & McDonald, 2014). The outline of the training is depicted in Table 3.5 and a sample of the content of training could be referred in Appendix A1. A 40-page Peer Mediation training manual is produced, used and copyrighted in this study for University of Malaya. The manual was being improved progressively through the comments from the peer mediators as the users. Improvement was made based on their queries and comments and comments from the support staff. A sample of the used manual can be referred in Appendix A2, A3 and A4 by the three respective peer mediators. A sample of peer mediation training programme can be referred at Appendix A5.

Table 3.5

*Peer Mediation (PM) Training*

Session	Time	Topics	Aims	Self-advocacy Elements	Peer Mediation Elements
1	9am – 4pm	Becoming a peer mediator	i. To understand and develop essential skills for peer mediation ii. To introduce the setting and rationale for peer mediation	Knowledge of self and rights  Communications	Value of facilitation Empowerment
2	9am – 4pm	Listening and facilitating	i. To understand the importance of active listening and visual cues in peer mediation ii. To understand the value of facilitation and confidentiality in peer mediation	Knowledge of self and rights  Leadership	Active listening Empathy  Cooperation Value of facilitation

Table 3.5 continued

Session	Time	Topics	Aims	Self-advocacy Elements	Peer Mediation Elements
3	9am – 4pm	Dealing with conflicts	i. To understand types of conflicts in relation to their feelings among young adults with learning disabilities ii. To be able to handle different types of conflicts	Communications Knowledge of self & rights  Leadership	Cooperation Empowerment  Cooperation Active listening Empowerment
4	9am – 4pm	Let's practice	i. To develop more confidence in peer mediators to implement peer mediation ii. To understand the rationale in keeping records and diary	Communications  Leadership	Cooperation Active listening Empathy Empowerment
5	9am – 4pm	Yes, we can do it!	1. To be able to do self-assessment and reflection 2. To know the importance of self-care and be committed to make a difference in others' lives	Leadership Communications  Knowledge of self & rights	Cooperation  Empowerment

### Understand my emotion (U+Me) training.

The content for

U+Me training was adapted from some resources including my personal experience based on the best knowledge in the setting of the study (Greeff, 2005; Sellman, 2009). The emphasis was on self-awareness and expression of feelings associating with conflicts adapting to the local context. The outline of this training is depicted in Table 3.6 whilst a sample of the content of training could be referred in Appendix B1. In Cycle 2, peer mediators were guided to write out the games instructions for the activities for this training (Appendix B2). Based on what they have written, they conducted the games in Centre U and for Cycle 3 in Centre D. Besides, we worked together to find suitable visuals to make flash card for the activities such as I-messages in U+Me training (Appendix B3). We contextualized the conflict scenarios based our own stories and setting (Appendix B4). The purpose of having the peer mediators to write their version of manual is to check the applicability and practicality of the manual with their active experimentation based on the Kolb's learning cycle.

Table 3.6

#### *Understand my emotion (U+Me) Training*

Session	Time	Topics	Aims	Self-advocacy Elements
1	2pm – 3pm	Knowing you, knowing me	To develop teamwork within the group To introduce the aims of the programme To be aware of each other	Communication Knowledge of rights Knowledge of self
2	2pm – 3pm	Identifying Emotions	To develop teamwork within the group To develop emotional vocabulary	Communication Self-awareness
3	2pm – 3.15pm	Expressing Emotions	To identify personal feelings and link to actions/contexts	Self-awareness & understanding of others

Table 3.6 continued

Session	Time	Topics	Aims	Self-advocacy Elements
4	2pm – 3.15pm	Identifying Conflicts	To explore contexts associated with feelings To introduce types of conflicts To associate emotions with conflicts	How to speak up Knowledge of rights How to speak up
5	2pm – 3pm	Speaking Up	To explore choices in a conflict situation To review learning from previous sessions and affirm each other To set up ground rules for peer mediation	How to make choices How to speak up about the need to seek help Knowledge of rights

### Observation Protocol

Observations protocol (ON) was prepared to record information while observing the research process by the peer mediators, research partners, support staff and the researcher. Naturalistic observation was used to note what was being observed in the natural setting (Creswell, 2014; Fraenkel, et al., 2015). Peer mediators and research partners made their observation and took field notes on the behaviours of research participants and activities during *U+Me* training, daily operation, before and after peer mediation to support the findings based on the research questions (Appendix L1). Peer mediators learned how to make observation during *PM* training, and on-site support from me, as the researcher.

I, as the researcher, and the support staff also made our observation using the same format on research participants. Besides, support staff and I made our observation on peer mediators for the whole process of this study commencing on the *PM* training in Cycle 1 (Appendix M1). Support staff were briefed by me on the requirement for their observation. Observation notes taken at different setting were

recorded and labeled accordingly such as during PM training, U4Me training, daily operation, before PM, during PM and after PM. All data was collected for triangulation and data analysis. It was important to take note in an open-ended manner to allow peer mediators and research partners to write down their observation and share their views freely (Creswell, 2014; Fox, Martin & Green, 2007). Data collected through observations was used to suggest follow up interviews, review and reflection with peer mediators and research partners.

### **Interview Protocol**

**Semi-structured interview.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on an interview protocol for each primary source of data with a reflective approach to the knowledge transformation process. Semi-structured questions were intended to elicit a more reliable data from all gesture and verbal participants in anticipation. For instance, it was important to listen to the silences to interpret different possible meanings including those requiring a yes/no answer (Porter et al., 2004; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). This includes the waiting moment with the research participants. Questions were formulated based on the research questions for research participants (Appendix N1, N2, N3 & N4), peer mediators (Appendix O) and support staff (Appendix P).

The interview questions for research participants were designed with still visuals as a prompt for them to check on their answers based on their own understanding as much as possible with minimum prompt (Appendix N1). The interview questions were revised with additional visual to fill in the blank answer in Appendix N2. This was suggested by the peer mediators during review meeting of Cycle 1. Hence, Appendix N2 was used in Cycle 2. It then was translated to Bahasa

Malaysia to be used at Centre D in Cycle 3 by the research partners (Appendix N4). Due to the decision of the management in Centre D, we did not interview the research participants. They were given the questionnaire to answer, and I managed to interview the support staff only using the questions set by the research partners.

In Cycle 3, the research partners were given the opportunity to formulate the interview questions based on the research questions (Appendix N3). It was agreed that we interview research participants who have gone through peer mediation, and support staff in Centre U only. Porter et al. (2004) have emphasized the importance of the interview skills by the interviewer in relation to the communication skills of the participants. This has reminded me to be creative and flexible during the interview process to facilitate interaction with all positive regards.

### **Documents**

**Peer mediation manual ©.** Based on the training plan, a 40-page training manual was adapted from the selected references. It was designed based on the research objectives of the study. Training notes were used and reviewed by the peer mediators during the training. Copyright is filed under University of Malaya, Centre of Innovation and Commercialization.

**Peer mediator's diary.** Upon agreement to participate in the study, peer mediators were given a diary with guideline to start writing about their daily experience to achieve the objectives of this study (Appendix J1; Sample of Diary in Appendix J2). This should develop the discipline of writing in view of developing their research skill. Guideline for keeping the diary was explained to them. The writing should continue with the commencement of peer mediation training about their observations, feelings and personal reflection. They were guided to write according to sections and reflective questions in PM training, U4Me

training, peer mediation in action, review session and planning session based on the Kolb's learning cycle.

Peer mediator's diary served the purpose of reflective notes where peer mediators were taught to note their feelings, learning points and ideas during peer mediation training solely for this study. Diaries were reviewed weekly to ensure they are on track, and at the end of Cycle 1, subsequently bi-weekly in Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 for group review and reflection to improve practice. At times, peer mediators were asked to review their diaries personally with me due to varied understanding and support needed. These works hold great insights for the development of the programme for the following cycle to take place. It also served its purpose of emancipation of self when opportunity arose at the later stage of data analysis upon critical reflection.

**Peer mediation log sheets.** During PM training in Cycle 1, peer mediators were trained to record the incident in a Peer Mediation Log Sheet (Appendix K1, Sample of PM Log Sheet in Appendix K2). Peer mediation log sheet served the purpose of recording descriptive notes, particularly on the conflict incident. Record was made after each incident being mediated. I made intentional support to the peer mediators and support staff. The guidance from the support staff should decrease from Cycle 2 to Cycle 3. Participants' artifacts were recorded by peer mediators and supported by support staff in peer mediation log sheets which served as tangible data for data analysis.

**Practitioner researcher journal.** As a practitioner, I am aware of the importance of keeping a journal so that I can improve my professional practice (Fox, Martin & Green, 2007). This included my observation on the activities, dialogues and behaviour with the actors within the activities in its setting. Moreover,

as a researcher, for the purpose of data analysis, keeping a journal allowed the chance to observe pattern or trends. This included reflection while writing, which I believe it would determine the effectiveness of the study procedures. The notion of embarking myself into this study started with my own discipline of reflection and writing on my practices where the underlying problem of young adults with learning disabilities were not able to resolve conflict constructively, which in turn led to the implementation of peer mediation. A sample of my journal can be referred at Appendix S.

Training plans, observation protocol, interview protocol for the actors, documents included peer mediation training notes, log sheets and peer mediators' diary, and my reflective journals acted as sources of data generation to use to cross check and triangulate information and patterns for data analysis and to supplement the accuracy of the data. Using multiple sources to generate data enhanced the representation and accuracy of the data (Aldridge, 2012). Multiple sources also guided the study to ensure that my instructional decisions were appropriate and could be triangulated for its validity. The sources included an explanation on the research process and procedure (Appendix F), and the anticipated responses of the participants in handout format with appropriate visual illustrations from my best knowledge with the participants. These were printed out for accessible and respectful engagement in research and referred for the application of data collection (Kidney & McDonald, 2014). These methods were to ensure my actors understand everything, or at least most of the process and feel that they are treated with respect during their participation.

## **Data Collection Methods**

In practitioner research, the fundamental reason to hold to the highest standards possible for generating and collecting valid and reliable data is the obligation to the participants as this study takes its position (Porter et al., 2004; Stern, et al., 2014). My obligation to my participants allowed generating and collecting of data which did not interfere the instructional process of the real setting. Choice of all parties involved was fundamental and respected in data collection (Porter et al., 2004). Observation data was ongoing from the previous year and continuous observation over the course of a year during the study provided valid data for the study.

### **Observation**

Both training plans consist of primary data from the actors. The data collection methods I used in Cycle 1 included observation commencing from training to end of the cycle with the use of all instruments with my actors (Figure 3.4). The use of a practitioner's reflection journal began prior to the study. Research requires attentive observation and empathetic listening for the purpose of attending to details that are usually being overlooked. In order to achieve attentive observation, I needed to adjust my attitude and put myself in the role of the person being observed. I wrote what was seen by attempting to see life through the eyes of the person being observed (Paris & Winn, 2014). I, as the researcher noted my observations in computer generated notes in my journal. During both training, I took the role of a participant observer actively participate fully in the training and activities. When peer mediators took their action, I functioned as non-participant observer, made all attempts to observe the activities as a researcher (Fraenkel, et al. 2015). This served

my role as investigator and peer mediators as active participants on the continuum of positionality.

Moreover, I anticipated feeling as a big issue when writing observations because they could interfere with what I 'think' was being seen. I believe observation granted me insight of communication among young adults with learning disabilities in regards to conflicts, resolution, collaboration, and community living. Hence, interactions between young adults and their relationship with each other, and the support staff were observed. Moreover, peer mediators were trained to make appropriate observations during peer mediators' training. Ongoing learning took place during action of peer mediation. After which, they were expected to record their observation based on the observation protocol and guideline for keeping their diary. Subsequently, they should improve on their observation and reflection skills in Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 towards a more tangible level for research skill. Sample of observation field note can be referred at Appendix L2 and M2.

### **Interviews**

In qualitative research, interviews seek the words of the people involved in the study to help in understanding their situation with increased clarity. Opportunity was given for them to share their learning experiences and feelings, as well as their perspectives on the study underpinning the ideology of self-advocacy (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). The research questions were used as the framework to develop the semi-structured interview protocol which was explained to the peer mediators progressively in Cycle 3.

In each cycle, interviews were conducted as a mean to solicit information regarding the participants' understanding of conflict in relation to peer mediation after **U+Me** training, and during review meeting with the peer mediators and

support staff. Individual interviews were conducted with young adults with learning disabilities after the **U+Me** trainings and peer mediation at week seven to week eight (Appendix N1 and N2). In Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, the interview protocol for research participants was supported by still visuals in the form of relevant photographs and drawings during the conversations, especially for those who have language and literacy barriers to provoke their involvement and comments (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Kidney & McDonald, 2014). Guidance was provided by the researcher to research partners in their involvement progressively from Cycle 2 to Cycle 3.

In Cycle 3, individual interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants who have gone through peer mediation upon their consent in Centre U (Appendix N3). For members at Centre D, individual interviews were planned to be conducted one month after **U+Me** training by the support staff at Centre D (Appendix N4). It was reported by the support staff that there was no support provided during the answering of questions. It was done by the research participants independently at their capacity.

Focus group interviews were conducted with the peer mediators (Appendix O) and support staff at the end of week eight (Appendix P). My intention was to verify the practicality of **PM** training for Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 with reduced prompting from the support staff. By knowing their awareness about peer mediation, the data collected granted me more clarity to move on with areas to improve, together with the peer mediators towards their ability on conflict resolution. All interviews were recorded using digital recording besides my field notes and personal journal. The digital audio records were used for transcribing into interview

transcription in Cycle 1. In Cycle 2 and Cycle 3, interviews were recorded in audios and videos.

### Document Analysis

All the documents designed for data collection were gathered, examined and analysis in relation to validate the research questions. Data collected supplemented data obtained through training, observation and interview. In group reflection, particular attention was paid to the understanding and perception and experience of all the actors in the study in validating their voice for implication of practice for the following cycle based on the research questions.

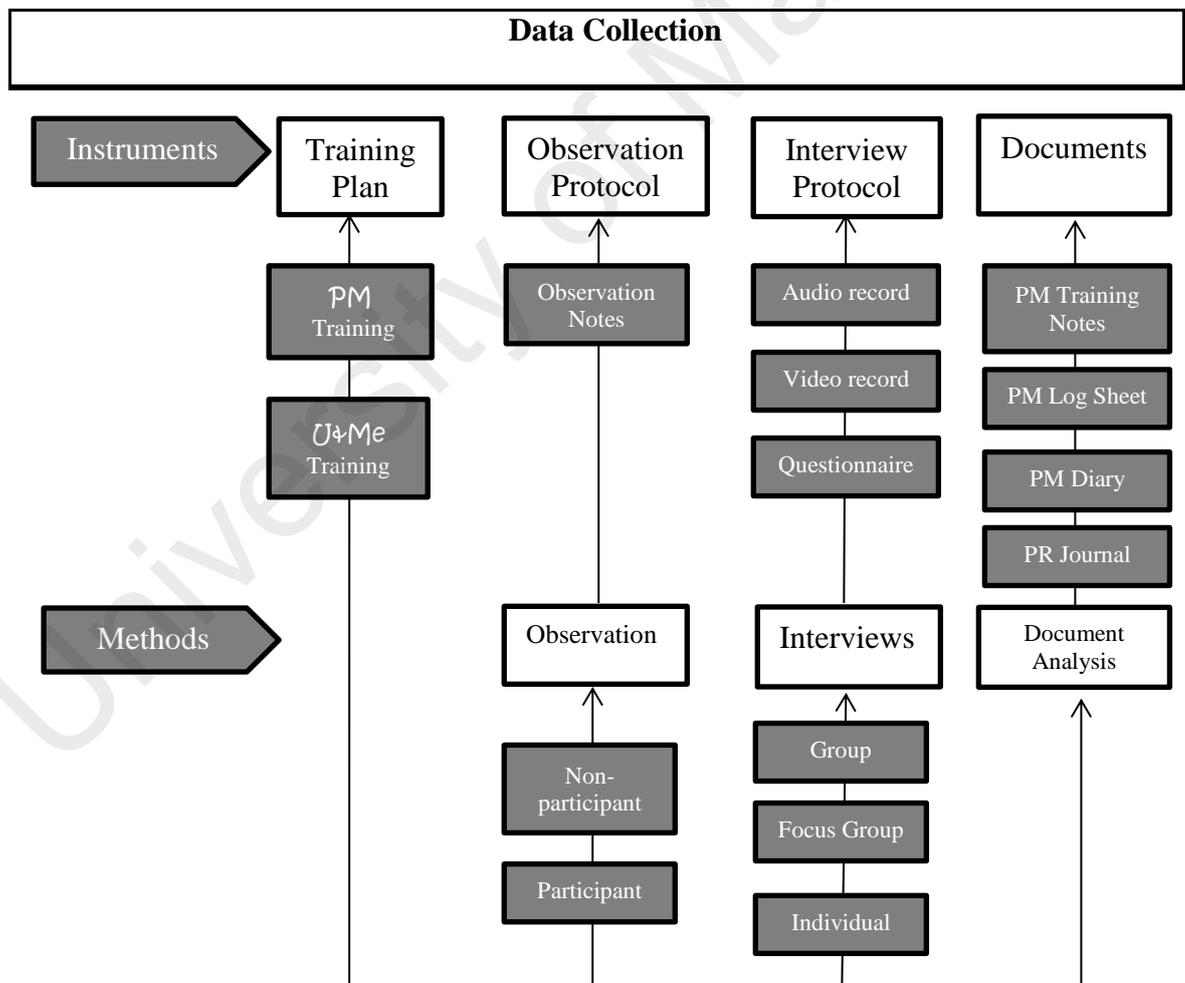


Figure 3.4. Data collection chart

## **Data Collection Procedure**

The 'voice' of the young adults with learning disabilities is critical in data collection procedure (Aldridge, 2012; Greenwood, 2017; Ollerton & Horsfall, 2013). This included their individual personalities, artifacts, communications, and interests throughout the study.

### **Cycle One**

Peer mediators participated in **PM** training and start learning and making their personal observation and reflection in the diary which began the procedure for data collection. I facilitated the 28-hour training over six days. Diaries of peer mediator and practitioner researcher were used for data collection throughout the whole process. Research participants went through **U+Me** training in week 2. I conducted this training whilst peer mediators made their observation based on the observation protocol. We had six training sessions including a review session. A debrief meeting at the end of training was conducted with the support staff for them to understand their roles. For instance, support staff needed to provide appropriate support to peer mediators at the end of the training, this meant to make understandable records in the log sheet. Support staff also provided support for research participants to seek help from peer mediators.

I, as the main researcher worked alongside the peer mediators in observing and facilitating their learning into action while collecting data together with them on a weekly basis from week 3 to week 6. At week 7 to week 8, I conducted individual interviews with the research participants, focus group interviews with peer mediators and support staff. Research participants were required to answer the interview questions on a questionnaire based on their understanding (Appendix N1 & Appendix N2). A review meeting was conducted where all documents were brought

out for review and reflection. Data showed four conflict cases were peer mediated by the peer mediators (Table 3.7). The pointer of positionality was positioned at Point 1 where the level of support from me as the main researcher was high in term of guiding the peer mediators (Figure 3.5). I sat in all the peer mediation sessions and we did review after each session.

Table 3.7

*Peer Mediation Cases in Cycle 1*

Date	PM1	PM2	Disputant1	Disputant2
29/10/15	Wynn	Joe	RP#26	RP#27
24/11/15	Wynn	Joe	RP#25	RP#24
24/11/15	Wynn	Joe	RP#24	RP#27
30/11/15	Joe	Maelyn	Wynn	RP#5

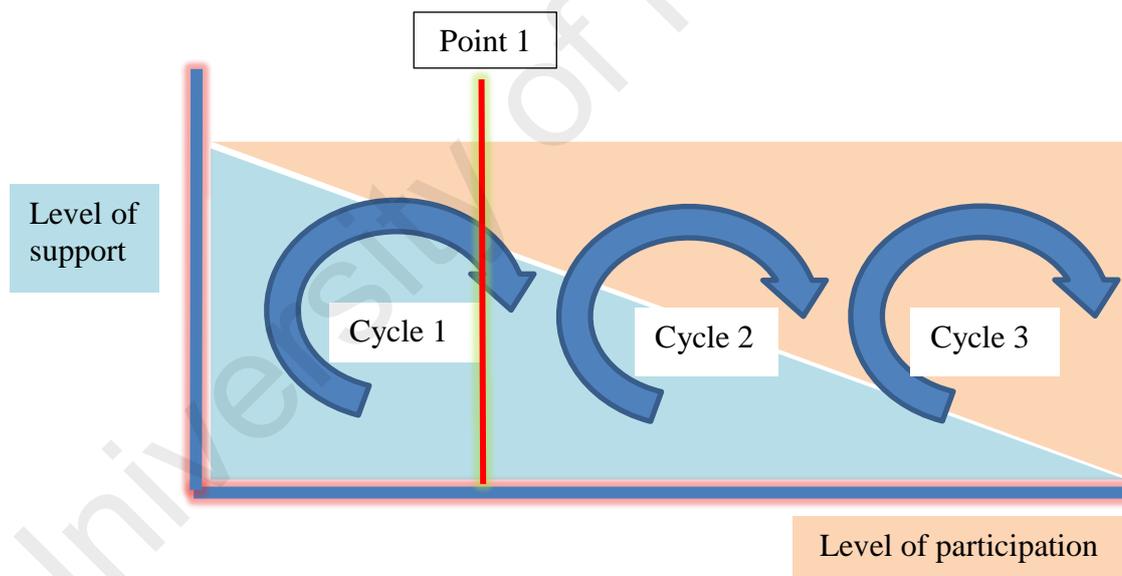


Figure 3.5. Level of participation & support at Cycle 1

From the collected data, peer mediators and I made changes accordingly from week 9 to 10 and prepare for action in Cycle 2. Peer mediators agreed to continue the training with added practical activities. Data collection procedure ended with a draft of Peer Mediation Visual Scripts by the peer mediators based on the peer mediation script. Peer mediators were given opportunity to search for suitable visual to produce

the visual scripts. The involvement of peer mediators as research partners started in this cycle as observers.

In terms of participation in conducting research, research partners provided constructive comments to amend interview question on research participants. For instance, in the interview questions set by me in Cycle 1, there was an empty space for research participants to fill in as their expression of thoughts. Research partners found it was more relevant to add another visual answer for them to answer (Appendix N2).

## **Cycle Two**

Data collection procedure in this cycle followed the same format in Cycle 1, but with increased level of participation from the peer mediators as research partners. Due to the re-structured programme and the work commitment of the peer mediators in Centre U, **PM** training and **U&Me** training were spread into more days and extended weeks. I conducted 30-hour of **PM** training over 11 days in 4 weeks. For **U&Me** training, the training was conducted collaboratively with the peer mediators as agreed during the review meeting in Cycle 1. A total of nine sessions were conducted to reinforce the learning points especially for members who have taken a break from the operation. This did not affect the content of the training, but given more time for the peer mediators to reflect and understand the content of the training. Peer mediation in action was carried on as planned throughout Cycle 2. Eight conflict cases were peer mediated (Table 3.8). This included one conflict case between the peer mediators of which I have to be the 'stand-in' peer mediator, and three conflict cases with the support staff. Other cases were handled by the peer mediators with increased level of participation. The pointer of positionality was

positioned at Point 2 with decreased level of support from the support staff (Figure 3.6). Intentional reduced of support was planned with no support staff in some of the cases, but evaluation and review meetings were held to monitor the progress for data collection. Cycle 2 was ended when the group decided that the changes made are sufficient for them to practice peer mediation practically.

Table 3.8

*Peer Mediation Cases in Cycle 2*

Date	PM1	PM2	Disputant1	Disputant2
7/3/16	Maelyn	JC	Joe	Wynn
7/3/16	Maelyn	Joe	RP#17	Wynn
21/3/16	Maelyn	Wynn	SS#4	Joe
21/3/16	Joe	Maelyn	SS#4	Wynn
29/3/16	Joe	Maelyn	RP#13	RP#27
30/3/16	Wynn	Maelyn	SS#3	Joe
7/4/16	Wynn	Maelyn	RP#28	RP#29
21/4/16	Maelyn	Joe	RP#28	RP#27

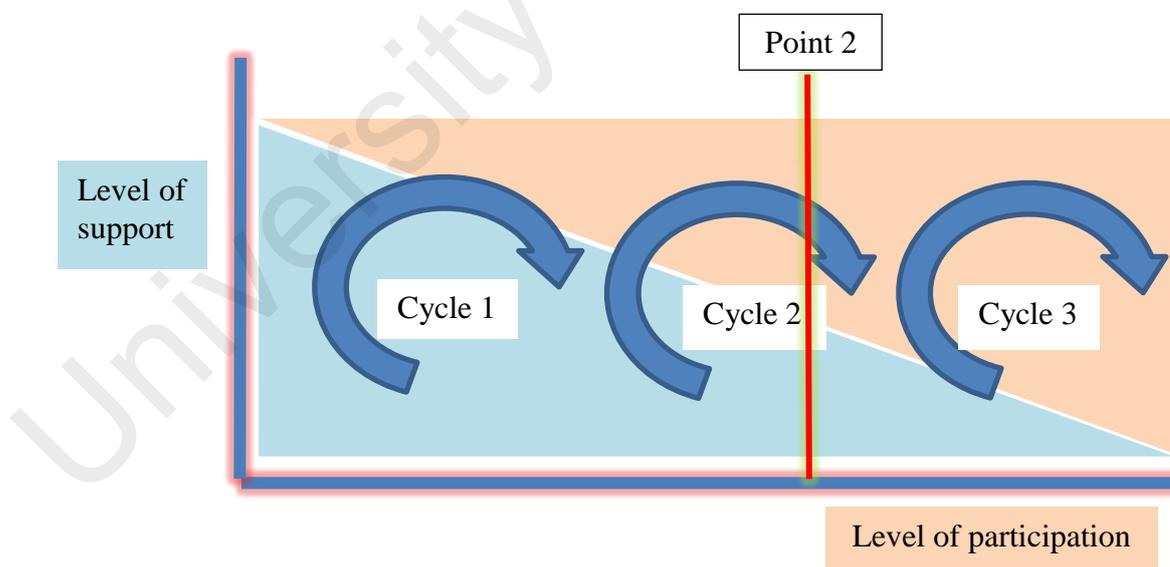


Figure 3.6. Level of participation & support at Cycle 2

In relation to research, research partners and I rigorously collected more valid data in Cycle 2 with constructive review of data in Cycle 1, interviews and planning reviews to achieve the objectives of the study. For instance, the answer ‘call for help’

was suggested to amend to ‘look for peer mediators’. Research partners got the opportunity to interview research participants using the visual interview questions (Appendix N2). Research partners were given the opportunity to summarize the results from the collected questionnaire. The findings were consolidated in relation to the research questions, followed by planning for our next cycle. Peer mediators’ Visual Cards were finalized at this cycle. Peer mediators were actively engaged in planning for Cycle 3 with constructive suggestions. We agreed to invite other local self-advocacy groups to join our training. Research partners sent out email invitations and made follow-up calls.

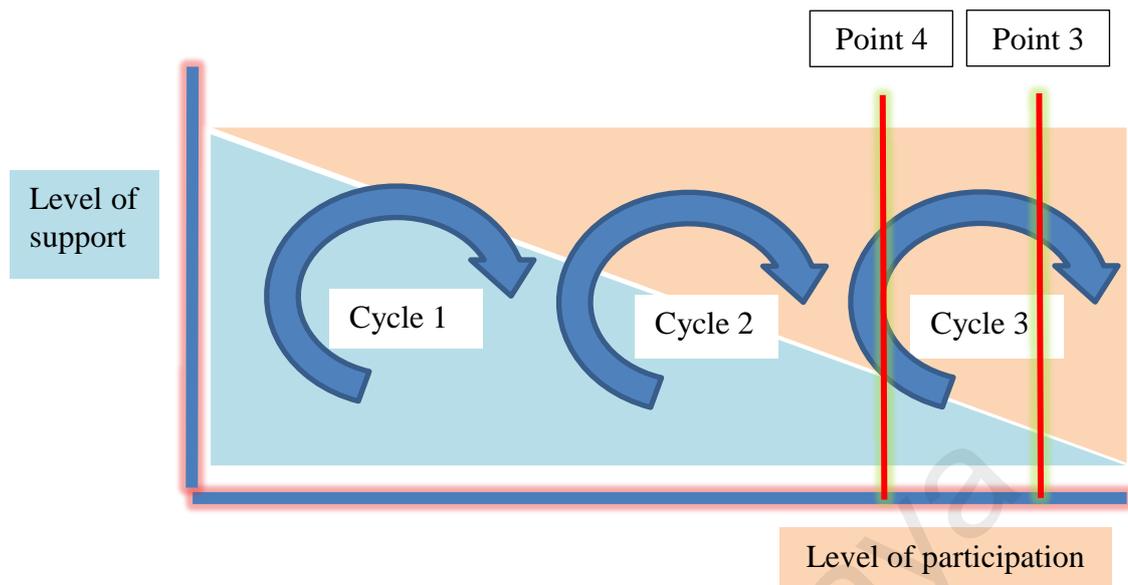
### **Cycle Three**

Peer mediation was expected to continue as an ongoing activity in its natural setting using Peer Mediators’ Visual Scripts in Centre U. In this cycle, research participants were expected to understand the role of peer mediators with minimal support from the support staff, whilst peer mediators became more confident to resolve conflicts among them. This included one case from the members who were not the research participants, and one conflict case with the support staff. In term of the role of peer mediators, the pointer of positionality was positioned at Point 3 (Figure 3.7). I needed to remind myself to intentionally reduce my support for their real participation in conducting peer mediation. Hence, I withdrew my presence during the session.

Table 3.9

#### *Peer Mediation Cases in Cycle 3*

Date	PM1	PM2	Disputant1	Disputant2
22/5/16	Wynn	Maelyn	Fenny	Kristy
26/5/16	Wynn	Maelyn	RP#28	Joe
16/6/16	Joe	Wynn	RP#24	RP#27
21/6/16	Wynn	Maelyn	RP#31	SS#5



*Figure 3.7.* Level of participation & support at Cycle 3

On the other hand, I conducted peer mediation training with four new potential peer mediators from Centre C and Centre D whilst the peer mediators were involved with sharing their peer mediation knowledge and experience. Due to the peer mediators' commitment at their work places, the training was conducted over 3 days for 18-hour only. Peer mediators and research partners from Centre U participated actively with confidence in observing and sharing their experience with the potential peer mediators. They volunteered to contribute their skills in facilitating games based on the training plan, and conducted peer mediation demonstration to the potential peer mediators.

Even though both self-advocacy groups were convicted about the peer mediation programme and its impact, only Centre D agreed to commit with *U+Me* training. Hence, peer mediators, Wynn and Maelyn conducted *U+Me* training to Centre D group of research participants in the Employment Centre as their experiential learning, with minimal support from me. A set of Peer Mediators' Visual Cards was given to the participating centre to conduct peer mediation at their setting.

The level of support was agreed to be needed by peer mediators constantly in providing practical support especially when new tasks such as game facilitator were given to them.

In relation to research, increased participation was observed at this cycle. The level of support was not decreasing as expected due to new tasks in conducting research as research partners. This included interviewing the research participants and support staff, transcribed the interview verbatim and data analysis. Upon discussion with the research partners, we agreed to conduct individual interviews with the research participants and the support staff at the end of Cycle 3 to collect more data for data triangulation. Research partners went through the interview questions to understand them and make an easy-to-understand version for them to conduct the interview with the research participants and support staff based on the interview questions used in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. We planned the interview schedule and research partners had the opportunity to conduct the interviews with support from me as the main researcher. After interview, they transcribed the interview into verbatim in the form of word processing after listening to the audio record using NVivo 11, and we analysed the data as a team. As the research procedure was collaborated, the position of positionality bounced backward at Point 4 (Figure 3.7) due to the increased task. Data collection procedure was ongoing and added more valid data to Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 to answer the research questions accordingly with clearer emerging subthemes and themes. A summary of the data collection procedure for each cycle is depicted in Table 3.10.

Table 3.10

*Data Collection Procedure for Each Cycle*

Cycle	Timeline	Content	Data collection procedure	Actors in action
1	Week 1	Peer mediation training	To record learning points and reflection in the diary	Peer mediators
	Week 2	U+Me training	Observation	Peer mediators Research participants Support staff
	Week 3-10	Peer mediation in action	Debrief meeting To record observation in peer mediation log sheet, and make personal reflection of experience in diary.	Peer mediators
	Week 7-8	Review	Focus group interview. Individual interview. To organise documents for transcribing, review and analysis.	Peer mediators Support staff
	Week 9-10	Planning for next cycle	Group reflection Planning for Cycle 2. 1 <sup>st</sup> draft of Peer mediators' visual cards	Peer mediators
2	Week 1-4	Peer mediation training	To record learning points and reflection in the diary. Changes made from Cycle 1 were used.	Peer mediators
	Week 5 - 6	Preparation for U+Me training	Plan and write activity plan	Peer mediators
	Week 7/ Week 12	U+Me training	Observation	Peer mediators Research participants Support staff
	Week 1-16	Peer mediation in action	Debrief meeting To record observation in peer mediation log sheet, and make personal reflection of experience in diary.	Peer mediators
	Week 13-14	Review	Focus group interview. Individual interview. To organise documents for transcribing, review and analysis in addition to data from Cycle 1.	Peer mediators Support staff
	Week 15-	Planning for	Group reflection	Peer mediators

Table 3.10 continued

Cycle	Timeline	Content	Data collection procedure	Actors in action
	16	next cycle	Planning for Cycle 3. Peer mediators' visual cards were finalised.	
3	Week 1	Peer mediation training	To practice <b>U + Me</b> training. To record the learning points and reflection in the diary. Changes made from Cycle 2 will be reviewed critically.	Peer mediators
	Week 3	<b>U+Me</b> training	To conduct the training.	Peer mediators Research participants
	Week 1-14	Peer mediation in action	To record observation in peer mediation log sheet in a more independent manner, and make personal reflection of their experience in the diary. Individual interviews	Peer mediators
	Week 7-8	Review & action	To organise documents for transcribing, focus group review and analysis in addition to data from Cycle 1 and 2.	Research participants Support staff Research partners & Researcher
	Week 9-14	Inclusive research in action Planning for next cycle	Group reflection Data analysis  Planning for next cycle or other possible long term project.	Research partners & Researcher

## **Ethics in Research**

Trustworthiness and ethics are always a concern. Approval from the University was sought according to the Research Ethics of University of Malaya. The primary ethical concerns of Informed Consent and Confidentiality were upheld in data collection procedure to generate data in achieving its authentic manner.

### **Informed Consent**

All the parties involved in this study were informed about the overall purpose of the study and the interview protocol. Instruments for research participants were adapted with visual illustrations and English, Bahasa Malaysia, our national language, acted as additional language for better and relevant understanding. Instrument for support staff was translated to Bahasa Malaysia as two of the support staff were more familiar with the language. No attempt was made to deceive participants and I stated that they could ask questions and withdraw at any time of the training and interview. As asserted by Porter et al. (2004), I was mindful to remind the research participants and peer mediators about the consent they have signed upon throughout the research and training as a sign of their right to dissent at any point. Visual support was used appropriately to achieve clear understanding of the participants.

During the course of signing the consent form, I was concerned about whether the participants genuinely comfortable to join the research project or simply obliged when asked to sign. In relation to informed consent and the notion of understanding, it is common to relate their ability to give informed consent to cognitive ability (Cook & Inglis, 2009). To overcome this issue in much respect, effort was taken to identify the key processes and explain the objectives and procedure of the study with visuals to ensure they understood their participation. Some participants understood and signed on the spot. Some required some time to

think about and discuss with their parents. They were allowed to do so in order to reduce the possibility of feeling obliged. Explanation of the research process was repeated before the training and interview session to ensure their understanding about their involvement. All their decisions were handled with sensitivity and respect. Moreover, the notion of having the research partners to explain the consent to members at Centre D has provided the evidence for equality in a more informed manner.

### **Possibility of Harm**

Three principles were upheld throughout this study. Firstly, to ensure free, informed and ongoing consent; secondly, to protect the rights and welfare of young adults with learning disabilities; and lastly, to respect each other with justice and equity (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). During the training and interview, I attempted to avoid any negative consequences on the participants, this included physical harm and mental discomfort which might arise (Fraenkel, et al., 2015). Participants' rights, interests and wishes were considered first when choices were made regarding reporting the data (Creswell, 2014). Training and interview were scheduled at times and places convenient for the participants. Their real names were kept anonymous with identified numbers. They were explained how the data would be kept. A summary easy-to-read update report was made available to all participants and parents concerned at the end of the project in the yearly newsletter of Centre U (United Voice, 2017, Appendix W).

## **Confidentiality**

Video and/or audio tapes of the trainings and interviews were numbered and not labeled with names. Transcriptions were numbered during the process of coding. Verbatim transcriptions, written interpretations and reports with anonymity were made available to the participants (Creswell, 2014). To provide protection for all training and interview subjects, no names was included in this dissertation document (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Participants signed consent for use of transcripts and any documents or other materials supplied to be used in this study as evidence of their voluntary and informed consent.

## **Trustworthiness of the Study**

This study was intended to establish a learning community utilizing self-advocacy skills for conflict resolution with young adults with learning disabilities. Chevalier and Buckles (2013) argued that research is a step into the unknown which will incur new risks over time. Stern, et al., (2014, p.217) highlighted that ‘action research does not only subject to epistemological stance, its practical and ethical criteria is significant to achieve a good action research’. Hence, trustworthiness of this study referred to the notion of the instruments and data were taken to ensure the accuracy of the findings to achieve a good action research. It referred to my obligation to ensure that the research findings were credible, and reflected the real voice of young adults with learning disabilities. On the other hand, the risk of biasness is acknowledged in regards to my subjectivity and reflexivity in the course of this research underpinning my role as main researcher and training facilitator besides my profession as a social practitioner.

## **Trustworthiness of the Instruments**

**Experts review of the instruments.** All instruments were validated by three experts in the self-advocacy movement and setting of people with learning disabilities in Malaysia (App H). These experts were identified based on their vast experiences in supporting and understanding young adults with learning disabilities' lived experiences besides their academic qualifications. My intention to engage these experts in self-advocacy movement marked the reliability of the instruments and data collection procedure so that these instruments could be relevant and practical. In Cycle 3, research partners were regarded as the experts in their own field in re-adapting the interview questions based on the research questions (Cook & Inglis, 2009). All of their comments to improve the research instruments were discussed and noted. This has helped to ensure the research is not dominated by one particular set of interests.

## **Trustworthiness of the Data**

**Triangulation of multiple methods of data collection.** Triangulation is used to capture reality of the study and to strengthen the internal validity (Maxwell, 2013; MacIntosh & Bonnet, 2007). Data collection procedure was aligned with the purpose of the study, conceptual framework, research questions in getting the research findings with multiple data collection methods such as observation, interviews and document analysis. For instance, data comparison was made over times in different settings, and follow-up interviews were conducted with the same people. These methods provided a valid avenue for the purpose of triangulation among the actors of the study.

The discipline and persistency of my observation in the field on top of my prolonged engagement in the field should enhance the credibility of my data together

with the data collected from the peer mediators, research partners and support staff. Data was triangulated between peer mediators as research partners, research participants, support staff and I. Among the actors of the study, data was collected in documents in the form of training notes, observation notes, questionnaire, diary entries and interview verbatim. The variety of data sources was believed to support the process of check-and-balance especially during data analysis and interpretation (Fraenkel, et al., 2015). Moreover, it was to achieve the validity of the study when evidence from the sources were examined and used to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell, 2014).

**Subjectivity and reflexivity.** Researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity are well-noted to enhance the trustworthiness and reality on data collection and data analysis (Balcazar, Keys, Kaplan & Suarez-Balcazar, 2006; Fox, Martin & Green, 2007; Merriam, 2009). My field of experience complimenting the role of researcher and facilitator could create advantages and subjectivity at the same time. As an outsider doing participatory action research, I entered this research with a perspective drawn from my own experiences trying to build a critical reflexivity into the research process (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Hence, I am aware of my own limitations and ability to consider the young adults with learning disabilities with whom I am working with.

At some point of reflection, I wonder whether I am able to lead a productive instead of destructive process of conflict resolution and participatory action research in a minority, least spoken group of people with disabilities comparatively. Often, their genuineness in their speech and daily conduct has affected my belief and action as my response in my practice. This has convicted me to be 'involved' with them as new ways of knowing in my relational practice of making this study "meaningful"

instead of “getting it right” (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Hence, it is critical for me to be cautioned about my own assumption over the voice of the young adults with learning disabilities with the importance of transparency and integrity throughout the study (Morgan, Cuskelly & Moni, 2014). Intentional validation discussions such as review meetings, focus group interviews and individual interviews were held to support my perceptions and interpretation of conflict resolution with the peer mediators and support staff of different opinions to ensure subjectivity and reflexivity of my perceptions and interpretation.

Another potential risk for subjectivity is the temptation to arbitrate and intervene the inappropriate behaviour of young adults with learning disabilities during data collection and data analysis. As an experienced social practitioner, it is my responsibility to control their misbehavior especially in relation to their interpersonal relationship. Often, I thought they needed reminders and prompts to stay on track to achieve the objectives. For instance, peer mediators would look up for suggestions and answers from me instead of finding their own solution and speaking up themselves. Instead of being confident to peer mediate and help the disputants to resolve their conflict, peer mediators would seek assurance from me as the main facilitator and expert in the subject. Acknowledging the relationship built with the peer mediators pacing with their capability and limitation, it is hard to ignore and cut off the researcher’s influence in this study (Balcazar, et al., 2006). Hence, I utilized the opportunity to build up their self-confidence on top of team building spirit with intentional reduced prompts. Opportunity was given to them to express their ambiguity after the peer mediation session, assurance was granted with increased self-confidence. I am convicted about the need of participation and empowerment to be applied in practice.

My experience in the field was expected to support my learning and dependability to understand the needs of young adults with learning disabilities as a co-constructed process. Sharing editing responsibilities of reports was used to support joint ownership of the data with the research partners. This has provided an opportunity to enhance the reflexivity research experiences in the observer/observed dynamic (Fox, Martin & Green, 2007). As I place myself inside the research project, I made all my effort and discernment to speak the vocabulary of the group with re-questioning when necessary based on the validated instruments for the study (Fraenkel et al., 2015). My interpretation of data was discussed and reviewed with my research partners to achieve accurate, consistent and quality data throughout the three cycles. This was to avoid invalid data where commonly misunderstanding happened when terms they used did not match with what they wanted to say with the goal to understand how the findings has affected the research.

**Members checks.** Members checking were carried out on the data collected with peer mediators, research participants and support staff. Field notes and transcripts were presented for the interviewed participants to check its validity especially in some areas which were not clear due to unexpected noises during recording. Peer mediators' journaling notes were checked by support staff M as a critical friend (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Support staff used mixual of Bahasa Malaysia and English in their interview verbatim. The Malay verbatim was translated into English and presented to the support staff to verify the meaning before coding. This increased the credibility of this study which lied in the real setting for data collection procedure. Maxwell (2013) has highlighted it as the most important was to rule out researcher's misinterpretation on what the participants say in addition to identifying the researcher's biases and misunderstanding over what the researcher

observed (p.111). It required diligence to document what was actually happening with conscious dynamic and flexible feature.

**Rich, in-depth data.** The focus of this study was to understand the practicality of peer mediation among young adults with learning disabilities within the chosen community. I believe the intention of the practicality and realistic actions learning would create rich and in-depth data which could potentially yield insights relevant to other broader contexts (Creswell, 2014). The prolonged time in the field for three cycles of data collection over nine months conveyed detail about the study besides my experience with the setting which yielded more valid findings. Signs of saturation were noted when the same data occurred over and over again with no new information surfaced (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

The rich data carried the eventual hope in the long-term plan to continuously evaluate what was being carried out could be replicated in other settings among these young adults. By sharing the process of my journey in writing with all the stakeholders in this study, and by attempting to make my beliefs and assumptions explicit and valid, it was my intent to allow the readers of my findings to consider the final conclusion in light of their own learning process and interpretations.

**Peer review.** Peer review was accomplished by sending an article to peer-reviewed journal for publication besides reviews by peers and colleagues familiar with or new to the research area (Merriam, 2009). Four abstracts were peer reviewed, accepted and published by International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IASSIDD) based on this study (Oliver, 2016). These abstracts and oral presentation were presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the IASSIDD. Research partners and I gained the first-hand dissemination of information as a valuable opportunity in the congress. Such

experience has affirmed this study in the implication of advocacy of participatory research as a legitimate research paradigm.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis are iterative processes that play off each other throughout the use of qualitative methods in participatory action research project. In qualitative research, it was always overwhelming to experience enormous raw data when data was generated and needed to be analysed. Initial questions that guided the data-gathering process and initial patterns in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 that developed were tentative and critical to begin data analysis. Hence, it was expected for me to start analysis immediately and make it regular so that new gatherings, including unanticipated data sources, could develop new questions through insights brought about by the data. All raw data was organised. I used NVivo 11 (QSR International, 2016), a qualitative data analysis software programme as my data management tool. This software has functions for storing, organizing data including audio and video, and attaching the user's ideas to text. It sorted out the large amount of data into categories, or coded segments, for me to file and retrieve the data easily. The codes are tagged by NVivo as 'nodes'. NVivo does not do the coding by itself as I needed to do it thoughtfully based on the research questions.

In Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, I did not invite the peer mediators to join the process of data analysis as I observed and noted their overwhelming response in their learning as peer mediators during the review meeting. I believe it's best for them to learn one skill at a time with some transferable skills developed in peer mediation training. Hence, I transcribed the recorded interview in audio and video into verbatim, scanned the field notes into PDF format and then imported the verbatim and PDF into NVivo 11 to organize the data. Data was organized into 8 folders according to

each main activity and actors of the study. This includes peer mediation training, Peer Mediation in Action, *U&Me* training and Support Staff. This form the parameter for controlled search. In doing transcription, notations were used for non-verbal expressions such as “huh”, “hmm” and “ah”. 2 support staff used a mixural of English and Bahasa Malaysia in their interview verbatim. Transcription was transcribed and translated into English and they were asked to check the meaning of the translation. In several interviews, there were short areas of missing or unclear speech due to noise interruptions during recording. These were recorded as blanks.

I started first cycle coding by reviewing and coding all the documents imported to NVivo programme in Cycle 2. Passages of various lengths were assigned to nodes based on the research questions, such as ‘Benefits of PM’, ‘PM challenges’, ‘PM experience’ and ‘PM learning points’. I created nodes and assigned nodes based on the content and the transcriptions of the passages. Content of the data was read repeatedly to ensure the matching of the assigned nodes based on the research questions. Each node contained information in search of pattern coding in second cycle. This began the process to reduce the data and uncover major concepts and their relationship. During this early stage of the data analysis, nodes were free, or independent of one another. 9 nodes were created with 22 sub-nodes in this first cycle coding. Some preliminary ideas regarding the categories and themes became apparent.

In Cycle 3, I imported new documents, audios and videos into NVivo, and assigned nodes onto the transcripts. The use of inclusive strategies was explored and used in Cycle 3 in this study (Kramer et al, 2011; Stevenson, 2014). Research partners were explained about the research procedures based on what I have gathered in the previous cycle. We then engaged *in elements of data collection, immersion in*

*the data, interpretation, negotiating meanings and critically appraising research outputs* (Stevenson, 2014, p.24). I imported the recorded documents into NVivo and research partners had the opportunity to do transcriptions for the interviews they conducted. We checked and verified the notes taken during the interview against the transcriptions to ensure the accuracy of the information. We added the data into nodes which were created in first cycle coding, and managed to create new nodes for new data when we found the data does not fit into existing patterns. 16 nodes and 30 sub-nodes were formed at this stage. The interview data was processed through reflection and inductive analysis as a team. We analysed research question 1 and 3 only. I, as the main researcher, needed to constantly ask relevant and critical questions and remain sensitive to unexpected data in my quest for greater insights with my researcher partners.

It took us some time to get immerse into the data. The overwhelmed responses of the research partners was noted and supported accordingly. At times, we took a break and returned to our data after a few days. We agreed to analyse the data manually in chart using visual-mapping sheets. For instance, for research question 1 which involved controlled answers by the research participants, research partners took the initiative to tabulate the data into table format. From the tabulated data, we analysed the understanding of the research participants triangulated with the observation notes and interview transcriptions. We also combined all the peer mediation log sheets, listed the dates, names of peer mediators and disputants in a chart. We categorized the types of conflicts and analysed its typology and solution. We combined the sheets with other documents into a larger chart eventually. As argued by Nind (2011), this should be an on-going process emerging from *repeated engagement in reciprocal learning through thinking about data* (p. 359). We

continued second cycle coding to analyse by describing and developing themes from the data based on the research questions. We planned and wrote the narratives in an easy-to-read format to complete the data analysis process.

It was critical to note the first experience of peer mediators in data collection and data analysis for this study in Cycle 3, a flexible method was in position for them to explore and search meaning throughout the process of thematic analysis. Analytical and reflective skills learned through peer mediation training were revised and applied at this stage. Argued by Williams (1999), thematic analysis is feasible by people with learning disabilities with a range of themes presented for them to explore and analyse qualitative data. Moreover, it aligned with the legacy of Freire (1997) where thematic research as a highly inductive process is seen as a form of social action (Herr & Anderson, 2015). From the nodes I created in NVivo, I presented to the peer mediators for further discussion. In order to visually discover changes and evolutions of thoughts and insights during the study, I have chosen to put my thoughts and reflections on paper. Research partners were guided and encouraged to do the same activities with a more flexible approach and informal way as we begun (Chapman, 2013; Nind, 2011; Porter, et al., 2004). We started identifying common key words to construct basic themes around possible themes progressively during our weekly meetings (Stevenson, 2014). It was a process of understanding data as an encounter beyond methodological tools as we made our space to read the word and understand the world (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Nind, 2011).

Reflection notes were brought up for group reflections using visual mapping on papers in searching for patterns and occurring themes. Transcriptions were pattern coded for similarities whilst being attentive to important points of views. Using writing as a method of discovery, I hope we would understand the complex meaning

of data, hopefully to discover new ways of seeing, saying, and thinking about the study whilst we make sense with the data. These included conversations across different modes of thinking were captured to make sense of reality. Such process intertwined with our emotional and intellectual involvement during the interpretation of the analysis. A concurrent and multi-method approach was applied at this stage (Aldridge, 2014; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). I facilitated the joint analysis of data, using simplified version of coding to identify common themes using thematic analysis in addition to data collected from Cycle 1, 2 and 3. This meant techniques and methods were mixed in difference ways during the procedure as a team decision upon reaching a saturation point. It was essential to be reminded about the need to create a cohesive, interesting, and trustworthy report on top of generating meaning together.

The purpose of data analysis in research was to guide the study in a methodically manner to form a logical and accurate report. This included sorting, sifting, and examining data to constantly ask the story behind the data and the rationale of it being told in the way as it is written. Effort of re-reading the journals and field notes whilst writing reflections was on-going with the intent of interpreting meanings from the data. On-going analysis guided the study based on the literature where concept was clarified which subsequently gave me new direction for further develop the study with the research partners, especially in handling the unanticipated data source and resolving dilemmas in participatory research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Appendix V provided an excerpt of our analysis as we progressed from sub-category to category and theme.

Engaging with the research partners who have no experience in doing research, I needed to be opened to the world of ideas in making sense of the data

with them, believing the process to be empowering and enabling. Much coordinating action was considered at this stage when co-reflecting process was in action (Gergen, 2009; Stack & McDonald, 2014). Chevalier and Buckles (2013) describe this as a complex process where creation and communication of meaning and affect took its position. This option was an overwhelming and challenging learning experience for us in definite term. Working collaboratively with my highest sensitiveness of the capability of the research partners was highly taken into consideration. This granted me assurance and confidence in my obligation to the young adults with learning disabilities that the programme was appropriate and practical to be implemented. A flow chart of data collection and data analysis procedure and a summary of data analysis are drawn out with the research objectives and questions at Figure 3.8 and Table 3.11.

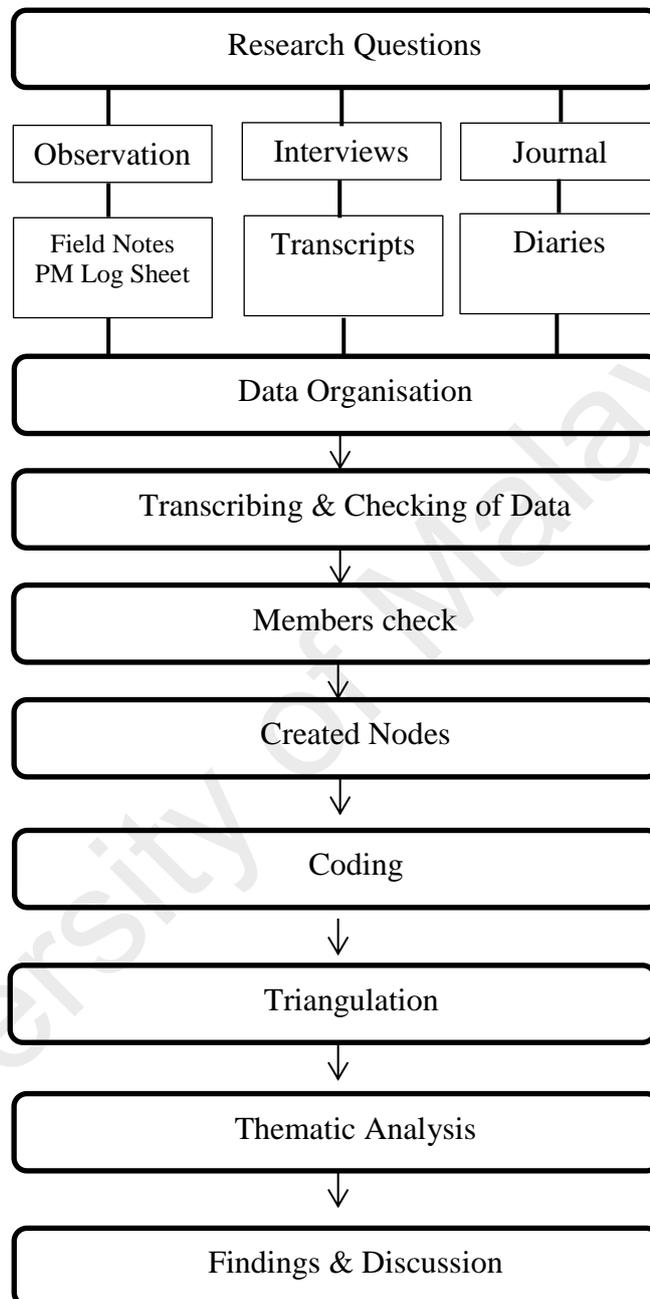


Figure 3.8. Data analysis procedure

Table 3.11

*Summary of Data Analysis*

Research Objectives	Research Questions	Instrument	Data Collection Method	Type of Data	Data Analysis
1. To explore the understanding of young adults with learning disabilities on the roles of peer mediators	To what extent do young adults with learning disabilities understand the role of peer mediators?	Observation protocol Interview protocol	Observation Individual Interview	Field notes Visual materials Interview transcription	<p>1. Data was de-identified and typed out for each group and individuals.</p> <p>2. Data was given nodes, codes and categories.</p> <p>3. Data was used for personal and group reflection.</p> <p>4. Data was analysed for common key words, patterns and themes.</p>
2. To examine the ability of peer mediators in resolving conflicts by and for young adults with learning disabilities	To what extent are peer mediators able to resolve conflicts for young adults with learning disabilities and others in the setting?	Observation protocol Interview protocol Documents	Observation Focus group Interviews Document analysis	Field notes Interview transcriptions & audio records PM log sheets PM diary Journal	
3. To explore how self-advocacy in peer mediation play its role in conflict resolution by and for young adults with learning disabilities	How can self-advocacy in peer mediation play its role in conflict resolution by and for young adults with learning disabilities?	Observation protocol Interview protocol Documents	Observation Focus group & Individual Interviews Document analysis	Field notes Interview transcription & audio records PM log sheets PM diary Journal	
4. To explore the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation for young adults with learning disabilities who had participated as research partners.	What is the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation for young adults with learning disabilities who had participated as research partners?	Observation protocol Interview protocol Documents	Observation Focus group & Individual Interviews Document analysis	Field notes Interview transcription & audio records	

## Summary

It was noted that my research concern was consistently linked to practitioner action with the insider and outsider roles upon my research subjectivity and reflexivity. I, as the practitioner researcher, placed myself on the nature of outsider participation and empowerment in this participatory action research for three cycles. Cycle 1 started with PM training and U+Me training respectively. Training manuals were developed for the practical use of the research. Cycle 2 aimed to enhance the training manuals with amendment suggested by the research partners from their experiential learning. PM visual scripts were developed with the research partners. Cycle 3 was carried out in sharing of knowledge with other self-advocacy groups with more rigorous observation and reflective notes from the research partners. Research partners became active in this stage taking the steps to advocate for personal and social change. I believe all three cycles was essential and critical to achieve the research ethics and the trustworthiness of the findings in this study. Ultimately, the findings aim to represent the real voice of young adults with learning disabilities as the actors of the study to achieve the meaning of ‘nothing about us without us’.

The question of insider and outsider roles was central to peer mediation in action in its applicability in the organizational settings as a collaborative process of participatory action research. My ‘outsider’ is no more able to offer value-free or neutral knowledge than the ‘insider’; rather, we speak from different positions (Truman, Mertens & Humphries, 2000). The critical point is peer mediation was practiced in favour of the practical needs of the research participants, the peer mediators as my research partners, ultimately the young adults with learning disabilities, with the special attention to issues of social justice and empowerment

underpinning self-advocacy skills for a better quality of life. Overwhelmed by hope and enthusiasm, this study was carried out with purposefulness and efficiency to contribute to the evidence-based body of knowledge in the respective academic and practitioner field. Findings of the study proceed in the following chapter.

University of Malaya

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the findings from three cycles involved in developing and establishing peer mediation services, from working alongside young adults with learning disabilities. The findings responded to the research objectives and research questions in Chapter One. The peer mediation development cycle began with envisioning the need for change, designing the services, and initiating a process to bring that change about. This was carried out in Cycle 1 as Envisioning Stage. This encompassed the preparation of all research instruments as well as designing and experimenting with the training manuals. Data was collected from 3 peer mediators, 19 research participants and 2 support staff. This envisioning stage reached its point when the actors of the study took their position in understanding each other's roles.

Cycle 2 was conducted as a Discovery Stage. This implied the developing and refining of research instruments which enabled the design of services to address gaps between what was done in Cycle 1 and what was needed in the implementation of Cycle 2. The evaluation of the process and its outcome marked the learning curve into the continuous improvement of services provided for and by young adults with learning disabilities in its practical context. Data was collected from 3 peer mediators, 15 research participants and 3 support staff. This stage has highlighted the practical usage of peer mediation in its implication of practice.

Cycle 3 dealt with sharing of knowledge and experience whilst making a case for the use of self-advocacy in peer mediation services, and planning to ensure the service continues to engage with the community and to renew itself. Data was collected from 3 peer mediators, 8 research participants and 5 support staff from Centre U and 17 research participants and 1 support staff from Centre D. In terms of participatory action research, 2 out of 3 peer mediators were given added responsibility as research partners. Their participation has provided a definite assurance of the potential and abilities of young adults with learning disabilities in its given opportunity and setting beyond peer mediation. Hence, Cycle 3 is recognised as a Participatory Stage of which I would use the findings to highlight the participatory action as a new frontier in learning disability research in Malaysia in relation to the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation.

Developing peer mediation service and participatory action research is like a process of re-engineering in some respects. Data collected is presented as findings based on the research questions. Data collected was kept in its original stance. The three phases of envisioning, discovery and participatory derived from the data during its analysis progressively. The data indicated that the actors of the study perceive peer mediation as useful for change and growth among individuals. Conclusions are drawn about how the development process needs to take account of the likely shape of peer mediation services to come underpinning self-advocacy skills. The finding of the participatory research process is presented in the last section in this chapter as insights gained from the research process from my perspective as the main researcher based on the fourth research questions as the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation. For me, the insights gained is significant as I believe it would add value in setting the ground work for the implication of practice in re-thinking and re-strategising the role

of self-advocacy to enhance the capabilities and potential of young adults with learning disabilities. This relates to the cultural change and environmental factors in enhancing the collaborative learning process when young adults with learning disabilities involve actively in the research paradigm as the cutting edge.

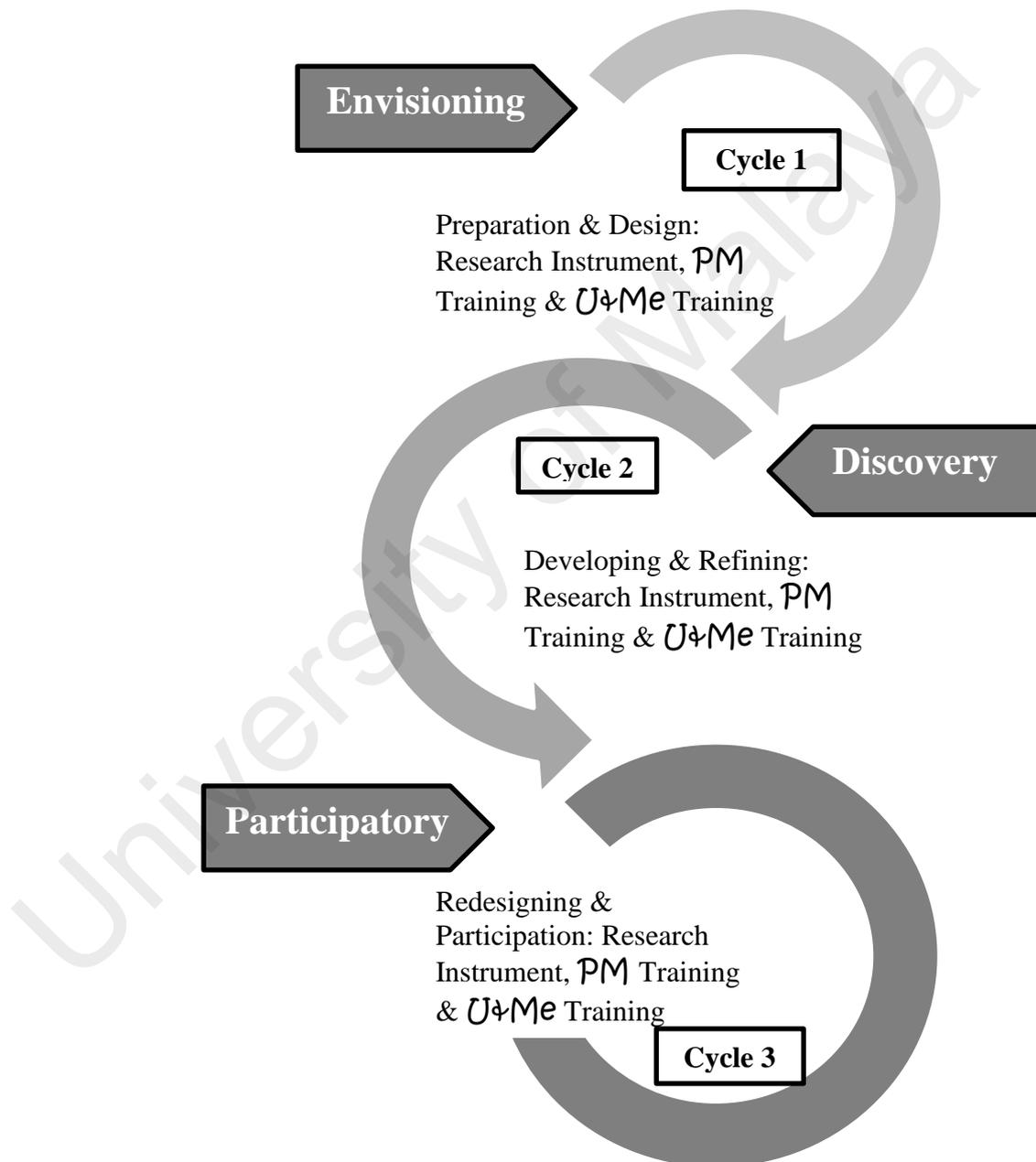


Figure 4.1. The 3 stages in 3 cycles

## **The Understanding on the Role of Peer Mediators**

Research question 1 targeted at research participants who have gone through U4Me training and Peer Mediation (PM) in action in the real setting. The epistemological position of this question reflected the understanding of research participants by recognizing the peer mediators and knowing the role of peer mediators. Observation notes (ON) were taken by the other actors of the study, the peer mediators (PM) in unedited format, the support staff (SS) and the practitioner researcher (PR) using the observation protocol. Interview data from Cycle 3 supplemented the figures to affirm the understanding of the participants through video analysis (VI) and interview transcripts (IT). All findings were triangulated among the actors of the study including observation and diary taken by the practitioner researcher (D/PR).

### **The Ability to Recognise the Peer Mediators**

The understanding of the research participants on the role of peer mediators was verified by the visual-aided answers and verbal answers of the research participants during the study in their ability to recognise and look for peer mediators besides relating their conflict and mediation experience. Visual-aided answers are presented in table format agreed by the research partners as an easy-to-understand approach. Findings from their answers were triangulated by findings from other actors of the study with its implication for support during the course of action.

**Visual-aided answers.** The frequency of marked answers to note the identified peer mediators has been quantified in Table 4.1. This representation shows the ability of research participants to recognize and identify the peer mediators as they have learned in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Wynn, Joe and Maelyn

were being identified as the peer mediators by the research participants during U&Me training. Even though there was discrepancy in round 1 of Cycle 2, it has been rectified by me as the main facilitator in round 2. Rectification is supported by findings of challenges faced by peer mediators in page 222.

Table 4.1

*Recognition of Peer Mediators in Centre U by Visual-aided Answers*

Name	Number of checked answer		
	Cycle 1	Cycle 2 (Rd 1)	Cycle 2 (Rd 2)
Wynn	14	15	16
Jamie	4	6	4
Sandi	8	8	5
Ereen	3	3	3
Joe	10	6	10
Maelyn	12	10	13

U&Me trainings were conducted to learn about peer mediation and the peer mediator as a new programme in the centre. The learning process and responses of the research participants were observed to affirm their ability to recognise the peer mediators. Each of the research participants has their own manner of learning. The point is, with proper training and opportunity given, their learning curve increased. It was understandable the research participants required more time to learn about the peer mediators. Their ability to recognise the peer mediators has shown progress in Cycle 2 when the activities were reinforced with constant support and reminders in the setting.

*(During U&Me training) ... they were asked to remember their friends' names and their favourite food. It was interesting to note of their ability to do so after 2 rounds of practice, though some need more encouragement and support.*  
(ON/PR/C1)

*During U&Me training, most of the members could relate to the requirement, except 2 needed much more explanation and guidance... We had identifying emotion activity, and all of them could relate and name the 4 emotions.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

The finding in Table 4.1 is triangulated by the observation and daily conduct of peer mediators with the research participants. Based on their observation, they concluded that some could recognise them as the peer mediators during our review meeting. Their observation was affirmed by the peer mediation conducted with the research participants.

*J: Some...* (IT/PM/C2)

*M: Some...* (IT/PM/C2)

*W: A few... we have eh...U&Me training that time, (R: ah) we play together, then looks like we ask them ah, do you understand what we say or not, they said understand, understand...if we explain to them, they understand... especially those who came to see us...* (IT/PM/C2)

Support staff provided their input on the ability of research participants to recognise the peer mediators. They agreed with the peer mediators that not everyone understand who are the peer mediators. This happened to members who do not talk and communicate. At most cases, support staff needed to refer them to see peer mediators by verbal instruction when they encounter conflict with each other.

*U: Ada yang faham, ada yang tak faham... dia orang macam tu la...yang boleh baca, dia orang cepat faham, apa tugas, apa benda peer mediator...ah... (N-agree)... Yang tidak faham ni...dia orang ada masalah pun tak tau cakap...*

*(Some understand, some don't understand... they are like that... those can read, they understand faster, what tasks, what is peer mediator...ah... those who don't understand... they have problem also don't know how to speak...)* (IT/SS/C1)

*N: Diam saja...Ya, bila kita cakap pergi jumpa peer mediator...kita kena arahkan dia...*

*(Quiet only... Ya, when we say go see peer mediator... we have to instruct him...)* (IT/SS/C1)

The findings from the support staff in terms of recognizing the peer mediators were based on the grouping of level of support endorsed by the organization. There were a few who needed support in helping them to recognise the peer mediators.

Two groups were notified, a group of members with minimal support (MS) and another group with intensive support (IS). This supported a mixture of checked answers in Table 4.1 as noted by support staff U that ‘they just ticked all’. It became challenging to guide along members with intensive support where their communication skills are not visible and expressive. However, support staff P commented that they know the peer mediators when they met them face to face.

*U: Yang faham boleh faham, yang tak faham masih tak faham... Kita pun ada 2 group kan, MS dan IS. Macam IS, semalam, suruh dia tick, dia tick semua, dia tak tau siapa...*

*(Those understand can understand, those cannot understand still cannot understand... We have 2 group, MS and IS. Like IS, yesterday, asked him to tick, he ticked all, he doesn't know who...)* (IT/SS/C2)

*P: Setengah itu mungkin dia orang punya level tinggi...kefahaman lebih... Dia orang tau you PM ialah boleh settle dia orang punya problem. Bila nak jumpa you orang, dan dia tau nama-nama you orang.*

*(Some of them maybe their level higher... more understanding... They know PM can help them settle their problem. When see you all, they know the names.)* (IT/SS/C3)

In Cycle 3, the same format of question was used with the research participants in Centre D to understand their knowledge of peer mediation including the peer mediators amidst them (Table 4.2) after *U4Me* training. Research participants from Centre D could recognise their peer mediators, which are King and Dong. This has affirmed their learning from *U4Me* training when both of them were introduced as their peer mediators including the reminders from the support staff during their daily operation setting.

Table 4.2

*Recognition of Peer Mediators in Centre D*

Name	Frequency of answer
Bob	8
King	21
Dong	9
Ros	5

Wynn and Maelyn were happy to be able to conduct the training and know the members at Centre D. From their observation, they found the members were helpful, cooperative and opened to learn. I, as their support staff and practitioner researcher also could see the members enjoyed the learning in *U+Me* training. They were able to follow the lessons well with much excitement. Wynn and Maelyn were happy to note about the results after the training. The finding has granted Wynn, Maelyn and I as the facilitators the assurance in knowing the ability of the research participants in Centre D.

Table 4.3

*Sample of Observation Notes during U+Me Training at Centre D*

Peer Mediator	Observation Notes (unedited)
Wynn	<i>Members help each other. Dong need help when he use PM visual script. King don't know translate in BM during peer mediation. Staff are friendly. I feel enjoy &amp; happy there with them. (ON/C3)</i>
Maelyn	<i>Members are cooperate. Dong &amp; King look more serious. Dong help other in the games. I feel glad to see them. (ON/C3)</i>

*W: I am happy to see they can understand who are the peer mediators in Centre D. (R/PM/C3)*

*M: I feel a bit surprised to see they can recognise their peer mediators. (R/PM/C3)*

Result was triangulated with support staff interview answer, research partners' and my observation notes. As support staff G had been briefing and reminding the research participants about the peer mediators, the findings showed their ability to recognise the selected peer mediators.

*G: I think Dong boleh la (can) in a simple term we used to tell them pendamai kawan (peer mediator)...they understand... (IT/D/SS/C3)*

*I felt relieved when I noted the ability of the members in Centre D to recognise the peer mediators as to what they have been taught for. (ON/PR/C3)*

The different dynamic between the visual-aided answers and the data from the peer mediators and support staff implied the ability of the research participants to recognise the peer mediators in the setting. This has encouraged the peer mediators to become more confident about the ability of the research participants. The stance of the support staff provided another insight in understanding the ability of research participants. It was encouraging for me to note the ability of the research participants in learning about the peer mediators and supporting their own peers.

**Verbal answers.** Wynn was able to relate to the research participants personally to check their ability to recognise the peer mediators. During our review meeting at Cycle 2, we analysed the answers again with the tabulated data. Wynn and Maelyn shared their insights based on their daily encounter with the research participants. Wynn noted personal talk with the research participants was more effective than group talk to express their thoughts accordingly.

*W: They can recognise us as peer mediator, but when I asked them in a group, they kept quiet, no response...when I talked to them personally, some can answer... (IT/PM/C2)*

*M: When there was no one talking in the group after being asked, they did not answer. But, they know us when I saw JC asked them who are the peer mediators, they pointed at us. (IT/PM/C2)*

Support staff did the review with the research participants during the daily debriefing sessions with the members of the centre. It was noted not everyone could verbalise the names of peer mediators.

*P: I asked them who are the peer mediators. RP#14 could say their names. RP#1 was hard to express. RP#10, RP#18, RP#22 could tell the names of the peer mediators.*  
(IT/SS/C2)

I, as the practitioner researcher made my observation and took the opportunity to ask the research participants about the peer mediators after U+Me training. I noted that some of them were able to articulate and some showed by their body gesture in recognising the peer mediators.

*RP#11: He said and pointed at Wynn, Maelyn and Joe when asked who are the peer mediators.*

*RP#10: She was able to tell the names of the peer mediators.*

(ON/PR/C1)

In terms of the findings from individual interviews with the research participants in Cycle 3, 7 research participants were interviewed by Wynn and Maelyn as research partners (Table 4.4). The interviewed research participants were able to recognise and recall the peer mediators who have helped them to resolve their conflicts (VI/RP#17; #24; #26; #27; #28; #29; #31/C3). Due to their learning differences, RP#17 needed visual prompts whilst RP#27, RP#28 and RP#31 were prompted verbally in recognizing the peer mediators. It was an intentional pre-arranged interview without preparing the research participants to gain the most accurate insights of their real experiences whilst opportunity was given to them to speak up. Their ability to remember the conflict supplemented their ability to recognise the peer mediators.

Table 4.4

*Summary of Interviewed Research Participants' Abilities*

RP#	Ability to recognise PM	Ability to remember conflict
RP#17	<i>Yes - with visual prompt</i>	<i>Yes - with verbal prompt</i>
RP#24	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
RP#26	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
RP#27	<i>Yes – with verbal prompt</i>	<i>No – with verbal prompt, she agreed</i>
RP#28	<i>Yes – with verbal prompt</i>	<i>Yes</i>
RP#29	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
RP#31	<i>Yes - with verbal prompt</i>	<i>Yes</i>

As the facilitator and practitioner researcher in Centre U, the time and effort put in for *U&Me* training has resulted findings which reaffirmed my stance on the ability of young adults with learning disabilities with training provided. Their ability in learning the objectives of *U&Me* training has provided evidence of their ability to recognise the peer mediators. This finding was parallel with Centre D when the research participants could recognise the peer mediator as taught. Each of the research participants has their level of understanding which directly influenced their learning pace. The ability and potential are set within the person, the argument lies in the environmental factor, including the support staff, to unleash their ability and potential in its collaboration.

*Today we learned more about our emotion, and participants were responsive. We also learned about I-messages. I am impressed by the participants with moderate level of support were able to relate their understanding with visual support.* (D/PR/C1)

*Now, they have known each other's names well. I noticed they are calmer in handling their emotion in relation to each other. Conflict happened has affected the other members to be more aware of their reaction and behaviour. The setting has eased to see peer mediators for their conflict.* (D/PR/C2)

I, as the practitioner researcher, understood what the support staff have gone through and could identify with their challenges in supporting members who have different levels of learning disabilities in a setting to learn a new skill. Each of them

learned at their own pace, as practitioner researcher, it is essential to know each of their learning pace, in order to provide appropriate support for them to learn well so that they could contribute their abilities at their pace.

*It was not easy to handle the whole group as most of them has different level of learning disabilities, I mean different rate of learning disabilities. The 'slower' ones need more time to think and answer. This gave the 'faster' one space to react, or do other things, or hard to focus.* (D/PR/C1)

*In regards to the role of supporting staff, I felt discouraged when their involvement was not as expected in the beginning. They were only observing during U&Me training.* (D/PR/C2)

The ability of the research participants in recognising the peer mediators has been encouraging as the finding evolved from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3 despite differing insights from the peer mediators and the support staff. It was about time and effort in making it happen as a team. The envisioning stage has granted the research participants a platform to speak up at their capacity, build up their relationship besides learning about peer mediation and recognising the peer mediators. Improvement was noted in the discovery stage and participatory stage for all the actors of the study as they understood their roles and positions in this study.

### **The Ability to Look for Peer Mediators**

The ability to look for peer mediators comes from the understanding of the research participants about peer mediation and the roles of peer mediators. Findings were based on the observation of peer mediators, support staff and I, and also the interview conducted with the research participants who have gone through peer mediation. Their answers have provided evidence of their understanding and the ability to look for peer mediators when they encountered conflicts.

The ability to look for peer mediators took time to become prominent in the research participants' response in Cycle 2 as compared to Cycle 1. Due to the notion of needing support during U&Me training in Cycle 1, the peer mediators agreed that

the research participants still needed more explanation on peer mediation and the roles of peer mediators. During our review meeting in Cycle 1, Wynn felt that they could understand about peer mediation, Joe acknowledged there was some who could understand and Maelyn acknowledged the need to explain further about their roles during U&Me training in Cycle 2.

*W: They can understand, because I see they know what peer mediators do during U&Me training and peer mediation. (IT/PM/C1)*

*I feel they understand what peer mediation ... (D/W/C1)*

*J: I wrote in my diary two third of them don't know (our role). (IT/PM/C1)*

*M: No... They do not understand what we are doing... during the role play, we need to explain to them the role of peer mediators. (IT/PM/C1)*

Support staff agreed that the research participants still needed more explanation on peer mediation and to understand the roles of peer mediator, especially to look for peer mediators when they were in need in Cycle 1. They categorized research participants who are literate with speech have the ability to look for peer mediators when they encounter conflict. Hence, the level of support has decreased. It was hard for them to read the understanding of those who need intensive support due to their communication challenges which sometimes did not have any responses except through explanation and constant prompts to look for peer mediators.

*U: Ingatkan ... dia (member) menerangkan masalah dia orang... and then kita kena cakap kena jumpa siapa, dia (PM) akan tolong... kita kena bagi support la, nanti kita nak bagi dia orang tahu yang peer mediator ni akan tolong dia orang.*

*(Have to remind... when they explain their problem... then we say go and see who, PM will help... we have to give support, later we will tell them peer mediator will help them.) (IT/U/SS/C1)*

*N: Kalau kita tak ingatkan, dia orang pun tak..tak tau... Berkali-kali..bagi tahu mereka kalau ada masalah, boleh jumpa peer mediator...*

*(If we don't remind them, they also don't know... so many times, tell them when have problem, can see peer mediator...)* (IT/U/SS/C1)

N: U kena ingatkan dia apa itu peer ... mediation kan? Kadang-kadang dia orang tak faham... yang mungkin kalau yang...yang high level dia punya itu faham la... yang low function tak faham la... sebab tak ada reaction ah...

*(we have to help to remember what is peer mediation, right? Sometimes they don't understand... maybe those...those high level can understand...those low function cannot understand...because no reaction...)* (IT/U/SS/C3)

P: Ya, selalu saya ada tegur dia orang la, bila you orang ada masalah, saya tak tau, dia EP member boleh jumpa Wynn, boleh jumpa Maelyn untuk selesaikan masalah dia orang la...

*(Ya, I always remind them, when you have problem, I don't know, the EP member can see Wynn, can see Maelyn to solve your problem...)* (IT/P/SS/C3)

Support staff played an important role in helping them to look for peer mediators in the envisioning stage. It is a continuous guidance and support in relating to them. Support staff N felt the need to instruct them and support them whilst support staff P would explain to them about the role of peer mediators and the purpose of peer mediation in a consistent manner.

N: Kita kena...arahkan dia...Kita kena support dia belakang...

*(We have to... instruct them... we have to support them at their back)* (IT/U/SS/C1)

P: ...ada program lagi, training, kena jelas cakap dan kasi EP member tau apa tujuan, apa yang PM menjalankan tugas apa...selalu ada cakap...

*(...got program some more, training, have to explain clearly and let EP member know the purpose, the role of PM...always must say...)* (IT/U/SS/C3)

The research participants started to look for peer mediators after understanding about peer mediation and the experience gained through peer mediation in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. For instance, RP#28 has requested for peer mediation when he encountered conflict with RP#27 and Joe respectively. This has proven his understanding about the role of peer mediators and the benefit he has

gained from peer mediation. I observed his calmness before seeing and waiting for the peer mediators to prepare for the session.

*RP#28: I want to go to the room...to see peer... counselor?*

*PR: It's peer mediator*

*RP#28: Ok, peer mediator* (ON/C2)

*PR: Do you want to see peer mediator?*

*RP#28: Yes, I want* (ON/C2)

*RP#28 seated outside the waiting area while waiting for the peer mediators to get ready their materials and to set up the room.* (ON/PR/C2)

RP#27 also showed her calmness in her second attempt for peer mediation. She understood the role of peer mediator. She was able to follow the rules when they were explained during peer mediation.

*RP#27 was able to understand the role of peer mediators in helping with her problem. She understood the rules of peer mediation as this was her second time seeing peer mediators.* (VI/PM/MY/C2)

Based on the observation of peer mediators, support staff and I in the research setting, through peer mediation, we found that research participants were able to look for peer mediators when they encountered conflicts after being explained and experienced by themselves. It was a progressive learning for the research participants. The recognition of peer mediators, the understanding of peer mediation and the role of peer mediators implied the importance of collaboration in the setting in developing the culture of peer mediation.

### **The Ability to Talk about the Roles of Peer Mediators**

The understanding of the research participants on the roles of peer mediators related to the consistent view of the most checked answers on the questionnaire (Table 4.5). They were expecting peer mediators to 'help me with my problem', 'listen to me', 'talk to me' and 'help me to speak up'. It was noted that 'play with me' gained increased answers in Cycle 2. Besides the visual-aided answers, research

participants who have gone through peer mediation were interviewed and were able to talk about the roles of peer mediators during the interview in Centre U.

Research participants in Centre U checked the most on getting the peer mediators to help them with their problem consistently in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. This related to their understanding that peer mediation is linked with their ‘problem’ as what they have learned in *U&Me* training. 10 checked answers were noted in the visual-aided questionnaire in term of ‘talk to me’ and ‘help me to speak up’. This showed the understanding of the research participants about the role of peer mediators in talking to them and the need of support to speak up.

Table 4.5

*Visual-aided Answers on the Roles of Peer Mediators*

The roles of peer mediators	Cycle 1 (Centre U)	Cycle 2 (Centre U)	Cycle 3 (Centre D)
Help me with my problem	12	12	5
Play with me	5	8	7
Listen to me	8	8	0
Fight with me	1	1	2
Talk to me	10	8	3
Sing with me	3	1	6
Help me to speak up	10	9	2
Scold me	1	1	0
Make fun of me	NA	2	0

The visual-aided answers were supported by the interview findings from the research participants in Centre U only. The roles of peer mediators were identified as the role of helping them with their problem and the role in talking to them during peer mediation. Research participants from Centre D participated in the visual-aided answers but did not participate in the interview following the decision from the management. The notion of ‘play with me’ gained the most checked answer.

**‘Help me with my problem’.** Research participants, RP#17, #26, #28 and #31 were able to relate the role of peer mediators in helping them with their problem.

*PR: So what did Maelyn and Joe do? During Peer Mediation?*

*RP#17: Help me with my problem...* (VI/PM/C/C3)

*RP#26: To solve the problem. Talk what is the problem... How to solve both of the problem...you and I...* (VI/PM/S/C3)

*RP#28: They tried to help me how I feel with my friend.* (VI/PM/R/C3)

*RP#31: To solve the problem.* (VI/PM/MA/C3)

Besides **U4Me** training, peer mediators also made the effort in explaining their roles to the disputants who attended peer mediation for the first time. I provided the support when peer mediators were not able to go beyond the script in explaining the rationale for peer mediation. This made us realise the importance to re-emphasize the role of peer mediators during **U4Me** training in Cycle 2 and make it a constant reminder for the research participants in helping with their problems.

*Joe: Hello, do you want to mediate?*

*RP#5 did not answer.*

*Joe: Do you want us to help you with your problem or not?*

*RP#5: No*

*PR helped to explain to RP#5 about the rationale to come to peer mediation.*

*RP#5 agreed to the rules of peer mediation.* (VI/PM/C1)

*Wynn: Hello, do you want to mediate?*

*RP#28: Mediate? What is mediate?*

*Wynn: Mediate means can help you to solve your problem.*

*RP#28: Ya, ok.* (VI/PM/R/C2)

Wynn noted her observation during role-play at **U4Me** training in Cycle 2. She re-emphasised the role of peer mediators to help them with their problem after the role play to ensure the research participants’ understanding.

*W: EP member looking Centre U staff, because staff play a role-play. So me, Maelyn and Joe was asked EP member what happen. Why Centre U staff do this role play, because if EP members have a problem. To know how to find Peer Mediator. To solve the problem.* (ON/C2)

The notion of their ability to remember how the conflict happened and peer mediation process they have gone through has proven their ability to understand about peer mediation and the roles of peer mediators in relation to their conflicts.

*RP#26: I sit different reaction...like this (show)... RP#27 sit the other way round. And Wynn asked what is the problem, that's it. And after that Joe talked. And then I said...* (VI/PM/S/C3)

*RP#24: I disturbed my friend using my handphone.* (VI/PM/SM/C3)

Moreover, I noted the relationship among each other in Centre U has improved after **U4Me** training. When conflict happened, this has caused the research participants in the setting to be more in control of their emotion and reaction after sharing about their problems.

*I noticed the environment of Centre U is more relax as I enter the room. Members were happier at work. They talked to each other in a better manner.* (ON/PR/C2)

Their ability to talk about their conflict and peer mediation has given confidence to peer mediators in carrying out their responsibilities besides affirming their understanding towards the roles of peer mediators.

**'Talk to me'**. Research participants who have been interviewed about the role of peer mediators were able to affirm the role by their peer mediation experience. It was understood by RP#17, #24, #27, #29 and #31. RP#17 and RP#29 were prompted with visual-aided answer.

*RP#17: ...talk to me*

*PR: Which one? Choose, use your hand... (RP#17 pointed and said 'Talk to me')* (VI/PM/C/C3)

*RP#24: They talk to me, tell me about my problem.* (VI/PM/SM/C3)

*RP#27: Talk to me.* (VI/PM/MY/C3)

*RP#29: Thinking... (Look at the picture) ... talk to me. (VI/PM/MK/C3)*

*RP#31: She was talking to me*

*PR: Yes so Wynn talking to you some more?*

*RP#31: Then she was trying talking to me... Talk to me and K. (VI/PM/MA/C3)*

The research participants realized the role of peer mediators to talk to them. This has granted the research participants' opportunity to talk about their problem as they understood the peer mediators would help them with their problem.

**'Play with me'.** The selected answer of 'play with me' in Table 4.5 gained increased answers in Cycle 2 in Centre U and caught our attention to re-think the perspective and understanding of the research participants about the role of peer mediators. The answer is consistent with Centre D. In Centre D, the notion of 'play with me' and 'sing with me' as their chosen answer did not match with the roles of peer mediators from the onset. We tried to find out the rationale of their selection. Upon our review and analysis, we related the answer to the experiential learning through games in **U&Me** training. Their checked answer was verified by our observation.

From Wynn's diary, she noted her observation and shared her experience in supporting her team mates at Centre U. This has given her confidence.

*Today we have U&Me training, EP member play a fruit salad games. I contact (conduct) the fruit salad game & then Maelyn contact <conduct> pass the emotion & then Joe contact (conduct) I-messages. All EP member enjoy the games. We help each other, support each other. EP members learn how to expression & emotion & their learn how to I-messages. EP member feel happy bcouz (because) each one get a change (chance) to expression, by themselves. I feel happy to see the EP member to play together, learn together & help together. I feel great for EP members. (D/W/C2)*

*W: I see everyone enjoy the **U&Me** training games. (ON/C2)*

Maelyn felt happy and great when she noted the research participants including herself, had enjoyed the games.

*M: All of us had a fun time playing the games.* (ON/C2)

Joe sensed the enthusiasm in the research participants during U&Me training.

*U&Me training session 2&3. Everyone was enthusiastic in the game though it need several translation to get RP#30, RP#11 & RP#19 to understand...* (D/J/C2)

This could create literal meaning by the research participants to relate their needs in learning together with the peer mediators through games. The finding has enhanced the quality of support provided by the peer mediators when they able to learn together in a more relax mode.

In Cycle 3 at Centre D, the same notion of 'play with me' was noted by the research participants as the roles of peer mediators besides 'sing with me'. Based on our analysis, this could be the impact of U&Me training where most of them enjoyed the activities.

*W: I saw they enjoyed the game... they are happy to see us...* (IT/C3)

*M: They are very happy...* (IT/C3)

*At the end of the session, one of the members came to ask me when are we going there again. I told them next month. I asked him whether he learned something. He said he learned about feelings. Some members were shy, but towards the 3<sup>rd</sup> session, they became more opened, and participated in the game thoroughly.* (ON/PR/C2)

Support staff G noted they enjoyed the games at U&Me training in relation for them to express their feelings.

*G: I could see they enjoyed the games...it was good for them to learn about feelings and how to express their feelings...I will try to teach them again...* (IT/SS/C3)

In relation to 'sing with me', support staff G explained this as due to lack of support during the administration of the questionnaire.

*G: ... but when you give them another picture, dia sudah lupa, dia suka yang dia suka saja, dia ulang apa yang dia suka... kenapa you? tak suka? Lagi, I just gave to the staff in charge the questionnaire, no proper guidance was given to the members...so they just tick what they like...*

*(... he has forgotten, he likes who he likes only, he repeats what he likes... why you? Don't like?)* (IT/D/SS/C3)

'Play with me' is agreed by the research partners and I as their 'voice' about the experiential learning in **U+Me** training. The 'fun' approach in the activities is noted as one of the approach in the research participants learning. It gives us assurance to look into the future approach of our training.

The envisioning stage has set the precedent for the research participants to understand the role of peer mediators even though many still needed verbal guidance. This provided avenue for peer mediators to be confident on their role whilst the support staff to position their support to both parties as they progressed from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. The discovery stage has shown better understanding of the role of peer mediators with the reinforcement of **U+Me** training, peer mediation and constant reminder from the support staff. The research participants felt safer to look for peer mediators when they encountered conflicts with their friends. Hence, this has reduced the real feeling of anger and frustration during its cause for peer mediation as a dialogue. On the other hand, support staff has reduced their level of support in Cycle 3, and I, was overwhelmed with the all the actors in taking their position at their pace with appropriate level of support in supporting the understanding of the research participants about peer mediation. To answer research question 1, the choices of the research participants have affirmed their understanding about peer mediation progressively by the use of self-advocacy skills in the form of visual-aided

answers and verbal answers. Inevitably, peer mediation has become a means for us to accept one another's needs and to overcome our differences in achieving a balance of support for each other. A summary chart of the findings from the research participants is depicted in Figure 4.2.

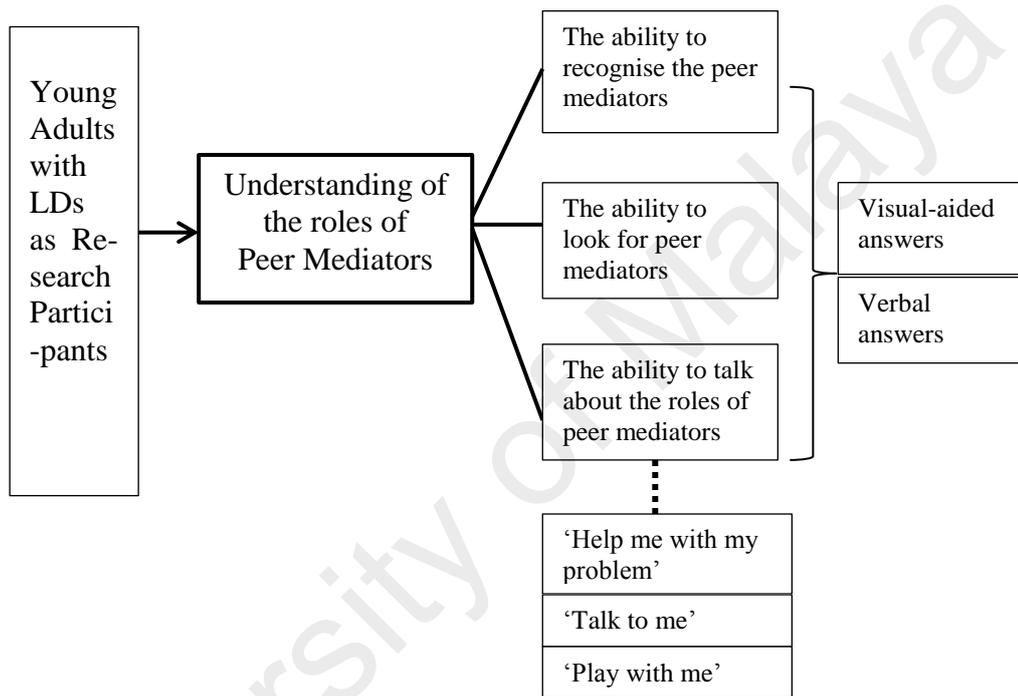


Figure 4.2. Summary chart of the findings from research participants

## **The Ability of Peer Mediators to Resolve Conflicts**

Research question 2 focused on the abilities of peer mediators in this study who have gone through PM training, PM in action, focus group discussion and review meetings. The epistemological position of this question reflected the experiences of achieving conflict resolution, and the shortcoming of traditional approach in demand of rigorous analysis of peer mediators and its environmental factors. This includes the challenges faced by the peer mediators in the course of acquiring the peer mediation skill for conflict resolution. Findings were triangulated through peer mediators' training notes (TN), diaries (D), observation notes (ON), video records (VI), interview data from support staff (IT/SS) and journal by the practitioner researcher (D/PR).

Table 4.6 showed the summary of peer mediation conducted. 17 conflicts were peer mediated. This included one conflict case which happened during peer mediation training and we used it as case demonstration. Wynn conducted 10 times, Maelyn 13 times, Joe 9 times, and I as the facilitator and researcher for once as 'stand-in' peer mediator. The frequency of peer mediation does relate to their ability to resolve conflicts which has provided learning opportunities for them to enhance their skills. We made our analysis about the typology of conflicts and found conflicts included name calling, disturbing, misunderstanding, arguing, fighting and bullying. All conflicts were handled using peer mediation script and visual scripts when needed. We agreed that 12 conflicts were resolved and 5 conflicts needed follow-up. Peer mediators followed-up 1 case whilst 3 cases were followed-up by the researcher. 1 case was not followed-up as the disputants were not research participants.

From the summary data, it was interesting to note conflicts happened between peer mediators, peer mediator and support staff. These conflicts yielded another

finding of the challenges faced by the peer mediators. These conflicts were categorized as misunderstanding. I, as their facilitator, took the opportunity to explain and encourage the peer mediators to be on constant mark as peer mediators, as even they might have conflicts with the others. Such encounters should be taken as real learning opportunities for progress.

Table 4.6

*Summary of Peer Mediation in Action*

Date	PM 1	PM2	Disp 1	Disp 2	Type of conflict	Conflict resolved?
29/10/15	Wynn	Joe	RP#26	RP#27	Name calling	Yes
24/11/15	Wynn	Joe	RP#25	RP#24	Disturbing	Yes
24/11/15	Wynn	Joe	RP#24	RP#27	Disturbing	Yes*
30/11/15	Joe	Maelyn	Wynn	RP#5	Name calling	Yes
7/3/16	Maelyn	JC	Joe	Wynn	Misunderstanding	Yes*
7/3/16	Maelyn	Joe	RP#17	Wynn	Misunderstanding & disturbing	Yes
21/3/16	Maelyn	Wynn	SS#4	Joe	Misunderstanding	Yes*
21/3/16	Joe	Maelyn	SS#4	Wynn	Misunderstanding	Yes
29/3/16	Joe	Maelyn	RP#13	RP#27	Misunderstanding	Yes
30/3/16	Wynn	Maelyn	SS#3	Joe	Misunderstanding & arguing	Yes
7/4/16	Wynn	Maelyn	RP#28	RP#29	Misunderstanding, fighting & bullying	Yes
21/4/16	Maelyn	Joe	RP#28	RP#27	Fighting & misunderstanding	Yes
6/5/16	PM#4/JC	Maelyn	Joe	Wynn	Misunderstanding	Yes**
22/5/16	Wynn	Maelyn	Fenny	Kristy	Misunderstanding	Yes*
26/5/16	Wynn	Maelyn	RP#28	Joe	Misunderstanding	Yes
16/6/16	Joe	Wynn	RP#24	RP#27	Disturbing	Yes*
21/6/16	Wynn	Maelyn	RP#31	SS#5	Misunderstanding	Yes

Note. \*. Cases need to follow-up

\*\*.. Role-play during PM training

Each peer mediation session had its process which yielded different learning experiences for the peer mediators. It has granted them the opportunity to sharpen their ability as a peer mediator in resolving conflicts among the research participants.

The skills learned in PM training became evident in practice.

From the findings, the ability of peer mediators to resolve conflicts started from within themselves, where the ability in accepting their own learning and coping style was introduced during PM training. It is then followed by the ability in applying the skills for conflict resolution in peer mediation. During the course of applying the skills learned, the notion of acknowledging the support needed from the support staff has enhanced their ability as a peer mediator. Moreover, the notion of appreciating the relationship with one another added value to the ability of peer mediators and the setting of the environment to a more understanding mode of the presence of one another. The peer mediation has granted the peer mediators opportunity to be a good role model in the cause of action when they gained respect from the research participants and the support staff. However, the whole learning process faced challenges as they took on the roles and responsibility. These challenges have complemented their personal fulfillment in a progressive manner whilst they learned to build productive communication and collaboration with one another in the setting.

### **In Accepting Own Learning and Coping Style**

During PM training, peer mediators learned about themselves through different topics and activities based on the model of self-advocacy and peer mediation. With excitement, the commencement of the training has granted the peer mediators the opportunity to learn about their learning style in relation to their environment and setting as a peer mediator. Knowing their own learning and coping style was one of the topics for them to reinforce their knowledge of self in order to build up their ability as a peer mediator. Accepting their own learning and coping style became important in the application for peer mediation in conflict resolution.

**By learning own coping style.** The conflict coping style is depicted by a different animal with its meaning and explanation during peer mediation training. Each peer mediator went through the statements of their reaction towards conflict they have experienced. In Cycle 1, Wynn learned about her 'withdrawing' coping style. She admitted it was her all these times as she did not like conflicts and she tended to avoid conflicts. Her coping style evolved to 'smoothing' in Cycle 2 (Appendix A2). She learned about the change of her learning and coping style with the attitude to progress at her personal capacity.

*I will keep quiet when people are argue or fight, sometimes I walk away.*  
(IT/W/C1)

*Last time I avoid & I feel helpless... I feel changing, I learning to know myself in Peer Mediation Training to share more.*  
(TN/W/C2)

She learned and accepted her coping style of giving up easily and became aware of her need for support in order to maintain friendship with others.

*I need to support do not give up easily, more relationship must be fair do not blame each other make them friends.*  
(TN/W/C1)

Maelyn learned about her 'smoothing' coping style in Cycle 1. This has made her aware of her relationship with others where she also noted her action of letting the conflict go at most occasions by keeping quiet and being fair to others. In Cycle 2, Maelyn learned to be more assertive in her actions and was surprised to note her change of coping style to 'confronting' (Appendix A3).

*M: I will keep quiet only.*  
(IT/M/C1)

*Not to pin point each other. Be fair to each other.*  
(TN/M/C1)

*I value my own goal more highly than Cycle 1. Through Peer Mediation I learn to solve and seek solution... To be more confident in my own self.*  
(TN/M/C2)

Joe learned about his contradictory ‘forcing’ and ‘smoothing’ coping styles even after a few rounds of checking with me. He knew his typical reaction of fighting back when encountering conflicts but mostly resulting with withdrawal. He took some time to accept his coping style. I highlighted to him to check and reflect about his own knowledge of self, where at times, he showed actions of conflicting himself. His ‘forcing’ style of coping with conflicts has provided us insights on his action and behaviour (Appendix A4).

*J: I will fight back with them. But, most times, I will walk away because I lost.*  
(IT/J/C1)

*I need to be more fair and not be bias and be careful of my relationship with parties involved.*  
(TN/J/C1)

*I went through the checklist again with Joe as I found that he did it too quickly without much thought. He was ambiguous about his choices of answers. Finally, we agreed that his style was ‘forcing’. I could identify with this in his daily conduct at work.*  
(D/PR/C1)

On the other hand, Joe did not show much improvement in his coping style despite having to check for another round due to his self-conflicting remarks in Cycle 2. His ‘forcing’ style became more prominent in this stage as he acknowledged it in his learning points. I pointed out to him the need for him to accept his learning and coping style in a more positive manner.

*There is no difference visible yet but although I like to force my ideas onto people, there is always something in me that tells me to stop and think about the relationship. I need to tell myself to be more open to people’s ideas and value their relationship & less argumentative (forcing).* (TN/J/C2)

*I went through the checklist again this time. Same process. Now he could accept his coping style. I encouraged him to take it positively with the understanding of his surrounding people.*  
(D/PR/C2)

Support staff M and P commented on the peer mediators learning and coping style based on their observation in the field. According to support staff M, Wynn has been trained in self-advocacy for the past 11 years when she joined Centre U whilst

Maelyn and Joe joined Centre U for the past 2 years which made a difference between their learning and coping style as peer mediators. She noted the issue of Joe needed to be dealt with whilst Maelyn has much learning capacity to build on.

*M: Wynn came to Centre U and has been well-trained by the staff about self-advocacy. She is more experienced compared to Maelyn and Joe, especially in term of her confidence, maturity and self-awareness. I see Maelyn has much potential to be trained... Joe, has too much personal issues to deal with. If he is willing to change, maybe there will have more opportunity for him to be more confident...* (IT/SS/C3)

*P: Joe is very hard, because he did not want to listen and improve himself... I see Maelyn very good, always want to learn... Wynn sometimes need to 'push'...* (IT/SS/C3)

The findings about learning their conflict coping styles shaped their perspective in their peer mediation experiences as their ability in resolving conflicts. I, as the facilitator of PM training, learned to accept each of them differently even though it took me more effort in understanding Joe as he is. The progress made by Wynn and Maelyn was evident in their knowledge to accept their learning and coping style.

*It was not easy to go through the items one by one with Joe. He still gets the same style, it's him that I need to learn to accept. But, it's conflicting. I just couldn't understand, that's why I need to go through with him one by one. It's just conflicting. I think he is a conflicting person for all these while. It doesn't make sense... I think I need to have another individual session with him, to make him think through about himself.*

*For Maelyn & Wynn, it makes sense when both shown good improvement. Maelyn to be more confident about herself, so is Wynn.* (D/PR/C2)

Peer mediation deals with conflict. Learning their conflict coping style added their knowledge of self besides highlighting their approach in helping their peers in conflict resolution.

**By their willingness to learn for self-improvement.** Their willingness to learn was noted with good progress during **PM** training and **PM** in action. This informed a positive attitude in learning new skill for self-improvement by the peer mediators. I was impressed by Maelyn's willingness to learn as we started the training. She was excited and able to complete all the required assignments even though she found some were difficult. Throughout the study, she has shown enthusiasm in learning new skills and wanting to improve herself.

*Maelyn tried to observe and write her records too. She has good learning spirit. She shared her struggle to join activity and observe. She has positive mind to try to improve.* (ON/PR/C1)

*But for me some of the homework difficult to do.* (D/M/C1)

Their willingness to learn was experimented in Cycle 2 with their involvement in conducting games for **U+Me** training. I explained to them about the rationale of writing down the lesson plan. They volunteered and agreed to write down the lesson plan for the game they chose (Appendix B2). This has shown their effort in learning and wanting to improve themselves. Later, they were required to conduct the games. Wynn's willingness to learn became evident in her effort to explain the rules of game a few times to ensure the research participants' understanding and ability to participate in the game as observed by the support staff.

*Wynn was good, she know how to wait and see who need help. She tried to explain again.* (ON/SS/P/C2)

Support staff P observed the willingness of Maelyn's learning during **U+Me** training in Cycle 2. He explained to her about her limitation and gave her suggestions to improve on her skills in conducting the games. Maelyn tried to overcome it by not referring to the notes as suggested.

*Maelyn took note when asked not to refer to her notes in explaining the rule of the game. I told her not to see the notes, just say it out. She tried to do it without the notes. I think she needs more practice. (ON/SS/P/C2)*

During PM in action, we managed to conduct video analysis to evaluate area for improvement on peer mediators in their willingness to learn for self-improvement. From the recorded video, we shared our comments. It was a good learning opportunity for them to give comments, listen to each other's comments and improve from the suggestions even though explanations were needed from me to support their understanding on the issue and setting. Wynn, Maelyn and Joe have shown their willingness to learning and improve their peer mediation skills.

Wynn showed her stability in conducting peer mediation. She managed to explain the peer mediation instructions to the disputants even though she shared about her fear in the beginning. It was observed that her fear did not affect her performance and her willingness to learn as a peer mediator. She was encouraged to take note of her listening skill and be confident about her role as peer mediator. She was ready and confident even though there were times her confidence was affected by her learning differences.

*W: Both the disputants were confused. I tried to explain other way. I was scared because JC not there. I explained to RP#29 about 5 times. (IT/W/C2)*

*She needed to listen properly to what the disputant asked. She was not confident and asked Maelyn for help. She needed to be confident about the purpose of peer mediation. (D/PR/C2)*

*She is confident, sometimes, she did not realise about her own confidence. During the PM session, she handled the situation very well. I am relieved and confident about her ability. (ON/PR/C3)*

During our review on the peer mediation skills, Maelyn noted herself as having limited and rigid expression during peer mediation. She read the script as required. She acknowledged her need to develop her observation and listening skills.

She was encouraged to be attentive to the disputants and sensitive to the needs of her team mate during peer mediation.

*She needed to get the disputants' attention while reading the rules. She took time to write down what they said, this hindered the process. She looked calm and confused at the same time. She did not provide any help to Wynn.*

(D/PR/C2)

*She needed to be more firm in knowing how to get across the message of peer mediation to the disputants if they were not listening.*

(D/PR/C2)

Joe also noted the comments given and agreed to improve on his seating position and the way he used his words. He needed to be patient in his action with the disputants as well as his team mates during peer mediation. All these learning points were noted and accepted for their personal development.

*He needed to mind his language and the way he wanted to control the disputants. He should not feel sad for one disputant and tried to console her, and feel angry on the other disputant and tried to be firm with her.*

(D/PR/C2)

Support staff U and N witnessed some progress in him in terms of his willingness to learn for self-improvement on his relationship with the research participants in Centre U as they viewed him inexperienced. They believed he would improve with time given to him.

*U: Sebab J pun baru kan? (R-agree) lama-lama dia pun boleh...dia dah mesra dengan semua...itu la... (R-agree)*

*(Because J was new right? After a while he also can... he was nice with others...) (R-agree).*

(IT/U/SS/C1)

Peer mediation is a new skill learned by the peer mediators. The support staff noted their willingness to learn as a way for self-improvement. Support staff P noted three of them have different pace of learning. Wynn and Maelyn were noted as making their good effort in learning and improved except Joe who had his personal limitation to take note of such as giving inappropriate comments.

*I saw potential in Maelyn. She is willing to learn and improve. Wynn is good, I saw her trying to do her homework. Joe is still hard, cannot focus on his job, and always want to comment on others.* (ON/SS/C2)

With much encouragement from the support staff and I, we noted good progress in the learning process as a way to improve themselves. The different pace of learning has given variation in the support in providing the most appropriate support to see them progress.

**By overcoming their personal limitation.** Wynn projected her learning styles by acknowledging her own limitation for her to overcome herself and was able to relate to her feelings in relation to her ability and learning differences. She tended to feel disappointed with herself when she knew she did not give all of her effort. She found ways to overcome her personal limitation by improving her behaviour and action. She was encouraged and challenged to be confident about herself as a way to overcome her personal limitation.

*Need to improve my mistakes & my behaviour.* (TN/W/C1)

*I fell (feel) upset bcouz (because) sometime I never done properly* (TN/W/C1)

*'I don't know myself well, I still no confidence'. A progress chat with her about 'Who am I?' worksheet... She acknowledged that she has no confidence. I asked her where is her confidence and gave her space to think about it. I hope she can take some effort to think about her confidence.* (D/PR/C2)

Maelyn showed her progress to accept her personal limitation and improve herself. Since PM training, she noted down her desire to improve. For example, she acknowledged her limitation in listening and became aware of the strategies to overcome it with guidance provided, such as to be more reflective about herself.

*I can improve myself by knowing my weakness. I feel happy to know how people feel about me.* (TN/M/C1)

*Jee Ching had distributed the card and ask us to place the card in sequence. After that we need to write down and tell everyone the story we had wrote*

*down. I feel confuse. I can't listen what Wynn had said because I did not pay attention when she is talking. I lean that I should pay attention and learn to listen to other when someone is talking.* (D/M/C1)

Upon reflection over her learning progress at the end of Cycle 3, she noted her limitation during her involvement as we brought it up for discussion. It took her some time to learn to accept and overcome her personal limitation in term of being flexible. We analysed the video taken during individual interview with the research participants. Below are her reflection notes:

*I need to be confident, especially new member... I need to be more flexible when asking question... I don't know ask other question. I only ask question based on the paper.* (IT/M/C3)

Joe was aware of the importance of knowing himself and was opened to learn to accept his limitation even though he showed signs of resistance. He acknowledged his strategies for avoiding future mistakes and problems. He has his personal strategy. For instance, he always reminded himself of do's and don'ts for himself in his personal growth.

*It helps me to avoid future mistakes, problems, arguments.* (TN/J/C1)

*Very frustrated...must try not to be distracted.* (D/J/C1)

*Must learn to say no and how to say it tactfully...must also think first before saying things.* (D/J/C1)

He was aware of the importance of knowing himself and accepting his own limitation in relation to a better inter-personal relationship. He was able to challenge himself with questions related to his past experiences. He did not seem to understand about other's belief in him and reacted over such reflection. This shows the need to improve and accept the remarks of others by developing deeper in his knowledge of self.

*It is important to me because without knowing myself truly I do not have a basis or base model or guideline on how to know other people or how to interact with people better and know their feelings.* (D/J/C1)

*Do I have low self-esteem because of previous experience? (D/J/C2)*

*Why do people always doubt me when I say things that are true? I have seen things with my own eyes and people always think I am lying... I feel frustrated and furious why people just don't want to trust me. (D/J/C2)*

Overcoming personal limitation has allowed the peer mediators to search for areas of improvement as they aspire to progress in learning to be a peer mediator.

Accepting own learning and coping style serves as an essential foundation in enhancing self-advocacy skills as the ability of peer mediators. Such learning was cultivated by learning about own coping style, having the willingness to learn for self-improvement and learning to overcome their own limitation in a progressive manner. I believe these sub-themes have provided evidence to affirm the ability of peer mediators in accepting their own learning and coping style at their different learning pace.

### **In Applying the Skills Learned for Conflict Resolution**

The ability of peer mediators in resolving conflict involves many skills learned in PM training for its application. These skills applied are identified as being observant, being flexible, being confident about themselves and being understanding about each other during peer mediation. These skills were developed and practiced throughout the study as the most prominent and important skills. Each peer mediator has their own set of skills learned depending on their learning background and experience.

**Being observant.** Observation skill is one of the most important skills in peer mediation. Peer mediators learned to make observations during PM training and U+Me training in Cycle 1. This skill has enhanced their background knowledge on the research participants especially for Maelyn and Joe due to their limited experience at Centre U as compared to Wynn. Subsequently, during peer

mediation, they were able to provide necessary support to the research participants in terms of resolving their conflicts.

Wynn made good observation over *U&Me* training and peer mediation based on her experience and her knowledge on the research participants. She defined observant as 'look around and know each other feelings' (D/W/C1). She was able to apply it in her observation notes on the research participants during *U&Me* training.

*Game for emotion names, EP very interesting the games... everybody do very well abset (except) RP#22 face...I saw RP#17 clever to go, he know how to puzzle. I fell enjoy too...*  
(D/W/C2)

*Today is the second time U&Me Training, today not many EP member. We enjoy the game, we feel happy. Jee Ching explain what animal are you. RP#7 not pay attention, & E is not joining the games. She do not like to join. We play the games only. I see everyone enjoy the U&Me training games.*  
(D/W/C2)

*Wynn could make good observation. She is the one could manage with observation, writing and joining the activity yesterday. She made relevant observation. It could be her understanding about the EP members, hence, her observation was true and good.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

Besides that, she showed her observation about the setting and was able to understand others by providing necessary support to the research participants. For example, she was able to observe, listen to others and provide support to the research participants who needed help during *U&Me* training at Centre U and Centre D.

*I prompted RP#28 because he can't remember his friends' names. After prompt, he can remember.*  
(ON/W/C2)

Upon reflection on the interview conducted with the research participants at Cycle 3, we watched the recorded video again and made our analysis. Wynn reflected her learning points in providing support to the research participants when she observed their needs in learning.

*RP#31 need prompted, she miss a lot, she never give straight to answer. Prompting Centre U member is not easy.*  
(IT/W/C3)

When Wynn observed the research participant's inability to understand the purpose of peer mediation, she made an effort to help them to understand in their mother tongue until the research participant understood fully before peer mediation started. During peer mediation, she used other objects to help RP#29 to understand her problem.

*W: (Speaking in Cantonese) Do you know what is peer mediator?*

*RP#29: I don't know...*

*W: Is, me and Maelyn ask you what is your problem. You have any problem, you tell us your problem. So, you have problem or not? Do you want peer mediation?*

*RP#29: What is peer mediation?*

*W: Is like... you fight with RP#28, you angry with him...you tell us your problem... do you want to tell us your problem? (VI/PM/MK/C2)*

*She got RP#29 to pay attention and listen and got both disputant to agree for peer mediation. She read the script and kept noted their understanding. (ON/PR/C2)*

Maelyn has shown some observation skills on the reaction of the research participants during **U+Me** training. In Cycle 1, she felt sad when she noted the inability of certain research participants to understand the games and provide the correct answer. She noted her feeling but did not provide any physical help to the research participants. In Cycle 2, she prompted the research participants to follow instruction during **U+Me** training. This showed her application of observation skill has improved from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2.

*I feel happy watching the EP playing and enjoying themselves. I learn to show different emotion on my face. I wish the EP will express their feeling when they face sad, happy, angry or scared feeling. (D/M/C1)*

*RP#7 and RP#17 need help from us to say out other EP favourite food. I feel sad because both of them did not pay attention when other were talking about their favourite food... I think the memory games are quite challenging for me but I try to memorize it. (D/M/C1)*

*... some of them were hesitate or don't know what to do next. We need to tell them to sit down... A few of the EP gave wrong emotion... I feel sad because until now some of the EP still don't know how to play the games. (D/M/C2)*

Joe made his observation followed by his frustration, about the reaction of some research participants whom he found challenging. He has presumptions about these research participants. This has become his obstacles in relating to the research participants.

*Felt nervous when conducting the first games because worried how is RP#12 going to share her name and favorite food because she cannot speak properly.* (D/J/C2)

*All of them were more interactive and more responsive even when I ask them to show their facial expression... most of them show interest in it except for RP#7 and RP#17. Asking them to watch also was frustrating, like they are not interested at all.* (D/J/C2)

His comments and observation about the inability of the research participants to share their feelings implied his ability to be observant and analytical but not in the application of patience as a peer mediator. For instance, during U+Me training, he tried to provide some prompts, but he showed his impatience during the course of action. This has hindered the process of getting the participation of the research participants.

*When the round started, it began smoothly but stopped not once but twice with RP#17 and RP#7. Previously they could easily remember but this time round they need reminder after reminder to remember names and favorite food.* (ON/J/C2)

*I feel RP#7 not interested at all because his body language shows he is not interested at instructions given... 3<sup>rd</sup> game... when the round started, it took some encouragement to get RP#7 to share his feeling and have him say it correctly.* (ON/J/C2)

*Centre U members... I feel that they keep it keep their feeling to themself... they sometimes I feel they find it hard to bring it out...* (IT/J/C3)

The peer mediators have shown their ability to make observation. Due to their different learning style, their observation came with different outcomes. Wynn observed in a positive manner when she would provide necessary support to the research participants. Maelyn has progressed from just observing to providing some

prompts whilst Joe felt frustrated as he related his observation with his pre-assumed mind on the inability of the research participants.

**Being flexible.** Being flexible was another skill observed during U&Me training and peer mediation in Centre U. Wynn was able to be flexible in explaining the rules of the games as planned and tried her best to make sure every research participants understood about the rules. The finding was supported by the observation from the supporting staff and I.

*She explained the rule of the game. She repeated the rule to RP#7 who did not seem to understand. She explained again and asked RP#7 repeat to check his understanding.* (ON/PR/C2)

*She supported RP#7 well. She used visual cards to help RP#12 to answer her I-messages.* (ON/PR/C2)

As each conflict is different in its person, context and setting, peer mediators needed to be flexible in the course of support. Wynn was flexible when she conducted peer mediation. She would ensure the disputants were ready before starting peer mediation. This was not included in the script but she did it out of her understanding and experience. Her flexibility was noted with her nature of being relax. This helped the research participants to settle down and able to share their problem.

*W: Do you want to mediate?*

*RP#27: No response*

*W: If you never sort this problem, anytime, you still have problem one...can you tell what is the problem you all don't want to tell? RP#27? (No response) RP#26 (No response). So, how? Do you want to mediate and solve your problem?*

*RP#27: Yes.*

*RP#26: Yes.*

(VI/PM/C1)

*W: RP#28, are you listen, listen huh?*

*(PM read the rules of peer mediation)*

*W: RP#28, are you listening? Are you understand?*

*RP#28: Yes.*

(VI/PM/C2)

She also showed her ability to be flexible in applying what she has learned in PM training for PM in action. When she noted the inability of a research participant to understand the explanation by her partner, she helped to ask in another format. This added the capacity of Wynn to understand and perform the roles of peer mediators. She made her effort to get the disputants to come out with their solution. This was also one of the skills learned during PM training, on 'questioning'. Wynn used open-ended questioning in getting the disputants to speak up and arrive to the term of conflict resolution.

*I help RP#17 to explain what Joe say. I ask him to repeat again and I explain to Jean also because she MCC (blur), not understand what Joe say.*  
(D/W/C2)

*She asked M how to solve the problem. She adjusted the question for M to get the solution.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

*She was able to explain what was peer mediation as questioned by RP#28 and explained to RP#29 too. She was flexible to get both disputants described their problem. She helped the disputants to relate to their problem and solution using open-ended questioning.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

*I learn to come up some question to Dong during I-messages.* (D/W/C3)

*Help Dong how to use the cards and prompt King a bit...learn way to talk to the members during I-messages.*  
(D/W/C3)

Joe was flexible during PM in action in explaining the rules of peer mediation to RP#5.

*Joe was able to explain a few time the rules of peer mediation to RP#5. He helped Maelyn to explain the rules and reminded the disputants to follow the rules.*  
(VI/PM/C1)

He was flexible in providing appropriate support to his partner during PM in action.

*When Maelyn could not get RP#17 to express his problem, Joe helped her to rephrase the question for RP#17 to tell his problem.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

Maelyn has learned to be flexible during **PM** in action. She was able to identify the feelings of the disputants and asked whether the disputant wanted to continue the session.

*Maelyn asked Joe whether he wanted to continue the peer mediation when he was silent and could not answer the questions asked by M. She asked Joe questions to help him to express his feelings over the conflict.*

(ON/PR/C2)

Support staff M noted the importance for the peer mediators to learn to be flexible during peer mediation based on her observation and experience in peer mediation. Even though there is a peer mediation script, more practice would help them to become more flexible in each case.

*... flexibility there (laugh) because I know, you all, I know you all got a fix set of questions ask, I know, that's good, it's a guideline, but sometimes you have to see the situation lor, ah...like, of course I'm sure they are like one or two cases where there's is out of er... situation right? like the one you did for me and Joe, ya (laugh) right?*

(IT/SS/M/C3)

I, as their facilitator made my observation and supported them when they conducted the games and peer mediation. The peer mediators' flexibility and relational understanding about the research participants has helped them to make good contribution during the **PM** in action in applying the skills for conflict resolution. This complimented their ability as a peer mediator.

**Being confident.** Based on my observation and reflection upon the ability of peer mediators in action, Wynn showed her confidence in relating to the research participants during **U+Me** training and **PM** in action. Wynn shared her positive experience and confidence in conducting the games and playing together with the research participants in Cycle 2.

*I feel happy to see the EP member to play together, learn together, & help together. I feel great for EP members.*

(D/W/C2)

*I explain the games how to play & I play together too...I learn how conduct the games.* (D/W/C2)

Her work experience has given her the advantage to enhance her confidence and ability during PM in action. She made effort in getting them to understand the rationale for peer mediation. Wynn's confidence was witnessed by her calmness during peer mediation by Maelyn and Joe.

*J: She was calm...*

*M: Ya, I agree...*

(IT/PM/C2)

During our review meeting on the peer mediation conducted, we discussed about the support given to the research participants on the solution they needed to achieve. She showed her confidence by answering the way to help the disputants to achieve their solution, which is based on the problem. She was confident about the reason for her to be flexible so that the purpose of peer mediation could be achieved.

*PR: What can you do before you gave suggestion? The suggestion of solution always come from where?*

*W: Oh, the problem.*

*PR: Ah, the suggestion of solution always come from the problem and feeling...* (IT/PM/R/C2)

Wynn understood and showed her confidence as a peer mediator where one needs to distinguish his/her emotion when conducting peer mediation.

*W: ... peer mediation is not like that, cannot kesian (pity) the person you know.* (IT/R/W/MY2/C3)

Her confidence became evident when she conducted U4Me training at Centre D. She was able to explain the games to the research participants, and gave appropriate support in helping them to understand and participate in the game.

*She was able to explain the game. She tried her best to relate to all the RPs. She gave clear instruction, she tried to prompt them to follow the rule of the game.* (ON/PR/C3)

Wynn has always shown her confidence as she has gained her confidence with the research participants in term of communicating with them. Her confidence became explicit in making decision during **PM** in action and her daily lives.

*For Wynn, she is considered one of the mature members who can lead an independent life. She seems to be able to decide what she needs to do for her own daily living chores and tasks. She is capable to live by herself. She is seen to have confidence to lead her own life.* (D/PR/011215)

In this context, Wynn was confident to note the importance to get the disputants to reach the point of knowing their problem towards conflict resolution. This notion was supported by Joe during his peer mediation experience.

*PR: What are the challenges?*

*W: ... Get to the point...*

*J: ...Like going round the bush (Wynn agreed)* (IT/PM/R/C2)

As the peer mediators noted the understanding of the context of each conflict, they became more confident in their peer mediation practices for more application. The support staff were confident about Wynn's way of relating with the research participants.

*U: Wynn was more natural and confident...Because she is more experience at EP as compared to Joe and Maelyn...* (IT/SS/C2)

Maelyn has shown capacity in understanding peer mediation in its application and was more confident as time developed. Maelyn noted her needs to be confident during **PM** training in Cycle 2, and exhibited her confidence at Centre D in Cycle 3 when time and opportunity were granted. For instance, she made her effort in explaining the game and got the participants to learn together.

*To be confident with my own self.* (TN/M/C2)

*She tried her best in explaining the game to the research participants. She explained to them in Mandarin. After a few demonstration, she was able to go one by one and get them understand the requirement.* (ON/PR/C3)

During the interview with support staff M, Maelyn expressed her confidence in conducting peer mediation during the interview when she was asked about the reason to be selected as one of the peer mediators.

*M: Maelyn, you think about it, why do you think we choose you to be trained as peer mediator?*

*Maelyn: You think I can improve... Maybe we have the quality to become the peer mediator*

*M: Ya, what's the quality of a peer mediator? ahh...you all do peer mediation so many times, what is the quality? You all should be aware what?*

*Maelyn: Have the confidence. (IT/SS/C3)*

Peer mediators were reminded to be responsible and confident as they take the role in helping and supporting their friends in peer mediation. Support staff M related to confidence where she suggested more practices are important for them to enhance their peer mediation skills.

*M: ...I think peer mediators need a lot more confidence, and need more practice la, but so far, I think er...quite good, quite ok... of course like I said, you all need more confident, more practice la, and er...just a tag... Erm, but I think you all need to practice more la, practice more and gain more confidence, and eh know to ask the right question... (IT/SS/C3)*

As I observed the peer mediators gained their confidence in peer mediation, I have made intentional decrease of the level of support to them. I was encouraged by their learning in conducting some sessions of U&Me training and peer mediation in my absence.

*Joe reported to me that U&Me training was carried on during my medical leave. He was confident and proud of his ability. (D/PR/C2)*

*I was pleased to note the confidence of Wynn and Maelyn in conducting peer mediation between RP#28 and RP#29 in my absence. Wynn's flexibility in explaining and ensuring the research participants was great. Maelyn needed to be more alert in providing support to Wynn in explaining to RP#29. (D/PR/C2)*

The confidence of peer mediators was applied during PM in action from the skills learned from training and much encouragement from me despite their past experience.

**Being open to express feelings.** Being open to express their feelings was one of the important skills for the peer mediators in this study. It started from the ability to recognise feelings towards the expression of feelings with one another. Progression was noted from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3. Wynn noted her feelings explicitly in the diary based on what she has learned in PM training. Her openness in expressing her feelings with the team was the indicator of her progressive learning through PM training. Sometimes, she expressed her feelings in relation to the other friends and co-workers at her work place.

*I angry boucz (because) people blame me. I angry when I was arguing to someone. A time when I felt happy was? – I happy when I joke, with my family celebrate birthday – I like to make fun.* (D/W/C1)

Practically during peer mediation, she related her feelings well although occasionally she found it challenging. Her expression of feelings resulted into understanding from me as the facilitator in providing necessary support in her application of peer mediation.

*She too shared about her struggles in guiding EP members.* (ON/PR/W/C1)

*I feel not easy because I not understand what they said.* (D/W/C1)

*I feel confused... about Joe and P have problems...* (D/W/C2)

*I feel a bit scared. This is first time do real one in someday.* (D/W/C2)

*I don't want to peer mediation because RP#28 have problems with me. I scared can't handle RP#28.* (D/W/C2)

Being opened to express her feelings has built up the relationship and friendship in Cycle 2 as they learned to share and trust each other as a team. Wynn

valued the importance of relationship and friendship as she learned to share more. She made her effort to understand the needs of others through peer mediation. From her expression of feelings, Wynn noted the importance to listen to others' feelings in order to understand their situation. This was based on what she has experienced after being listened to. In her expression of feelings, I noted she handled her emotions well with a stronger will to overcome her challenges.

*Peer mediations make me feel to get know each other (other) feeling (feeling) & listen to them how they feeling (feeling). Try understand (understand) what they situation.* (D/W/C1)

*I always like to see how Wynn expressed her stress and frustration at work. I find it helped her to be stronger.* (D/PR/C2)

*I feel not sad anymore bcouz (because) I share out.* (D/W/C2)

*Now relationship become more. Relationship to be a friend is importance.* (TN/W/C2)

The notion of them learning to be open to share their personal life has resulted in their relationship being built in much appreciation of each other. For example, Wynn was able to relate her strong relationship with her immediate family members, friends and colleagues. This was supported by her ability to name the people in her life through her circle of support as she understood them as their pillar of support (Appendix A2).

*I like W's circle, as genuine as her at most time. I could see she made real effort in thinking out her circle family and friends. She knows who is important in her life and where to find help when she needs it.* (D/PR/C2)

Wynn shared about her personal experience with her late father. She was open to share about her own experiences from her heart. She understood the importance of relationship and felt her improvement after learning about peer mediation. She shared the importance of being open with the team which she has not

been doing for some time. Moreover, she noted her change of conflict coping style with her value in relationship with others. She was encouraged to be more confident.

*Wynn went on with her sharing about her experience in taking care of her dad at his last stage of life. This was the first time I heard her speaking in tears. She went through some details, of the hassle, and her emotion. Listening to Wynn's personal experience, I could sense she has kept her feelings since then... I saw a different sight of her when she took the courage to share her experience.* (D/PR/C2)

Maelyn noted her learning from self-advocacy training and PM training which has helped her to be opened to express her feelings.

*Self-advocacy skills help me to speak up...to say out my feelings.* (D/M/C1)

*Learn to express my feeling.* (TN/M/C2)

There was not much of uneasy feeling shared by Maelyn specifically. She was still learning to be open to express her feelings appropriately. She shared about her personal experience of how her mother took care of her when she was hospitalized for brain surgery without much details and notification of feelings.

*M continued to share her experience when she was sick, and how her mother took care of her. Though not in-depth, she shared her appreciation to her mother's love and care. I wonder could it be because of the surgery she went through, she could not remember much about her life? I hope to know her more.* (D/PR/C2)

*I always needed to prompt Maelyn to think deeper about her specific feelings. She did not share much about her deeper feelings. I asked her how she felt about the incidents, she said ok only.* (D/PR/C2)

Joe has progressed to be more open to express his feelings comparatively from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3. Joe shared about his experience on an excursion with his mum where he did not make a good effort in making it successful. He was challenged to reflect on his experience in relation to his recent and present life.

*J started sharing about his Mt Kinabalu Climb experience when he was 15. It wasn't in-depth, but it depicted his personality when he was young. He identified himself easily gave up, as he didn't manage to climb to the top. I connected his experience as who he is for all these years. Then I challenged*

*to relook and reflect upon his own life, hoping he would be encouraged to persevere, not easily give up.* (D/PR/C2)

He acknowledged the benefits of peer mediation in developing his feelings within himself and towards the research participants in a more understanding manner.

*Learn how to express myself ... still need to improve feeling.* (D/J/C1)

*PM has helped me to become more friendly, discern people's feelings a bit more better, handle conflict issue a bit more.* (D/J/C2)

I felt relieved when he shared about the importance of expressing his feelings which has helped him to be more aware of his feelings and his relationship with others. His acknowledgement of his feelings at the end of Cycle 3 has granted me some assurance of what he has learned and applied in this study.

*He was asking about his mix emotions. He shared about his first experience in his life looking for someone to talk about his feelings and distress. He bravely posted his emotional needs on his facebook wall. I have noted he has grown within himself, at some point without realizing, but practically he is striving.* (D/PR/C3)

Going through the feelings of the peer mediators at their different pace has opened up the avenue for them to grow inwardly, in accepting themselves with confidence, in relation to be a peer mediator in supporting their peers with conflicts.

In my observation, it was good to note the peer mediators learned to share and trust each other from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3 in PM training, U&Me training, PM in action and our review meetings. Wynn and Joe have been closer due to their work setting as compared with Maelyn. Improvement has shown after being encouraged from time to time. Wynn took more effort in building up her relationship with Maelyn, and Maelyn started to open herself up to the friendship and partnership as peer mediators. Joe remained close with Wynn at the later stage. He did not show much initiative to build up the relationship with Maelyn. I believe it is an ongoing

effort that they need to put effort in whilst seeing the need for the team dynamic to be built up for the good for all.

**Being understanding about each other.** The ability to be expressive about their feelings has built up their understanding about each other as peer mediators. The result of my intentionally reduced support has provided avenue to increase the level of peer support during U&Me training and PM in action as they learned to understand about each other.

Maelyn has shown good progress in her understanding in building relationship with others by asking more questions as she related to the skills she has learned during PM training.

*By using open-ended question I learn that I can continue to ask more question to build friendship & relationship.* (TN/MY/C2)

For example, by knowing each other's conflict coping styles, they learned to build up their working relationship during peer mediation. Wynn's 'withdrawing'- 'smoothing' style and Maelyn's 'smoothing'- 'confronting' style have complemented the conflict coping style of Joe's 'forcing' style in a natural manner. As they understand each other, Wynn and Maelyn became receptive towards the limitation of Joe and insisted on working with him as a team as peer mediators. It has affected the working relationship among the peer mediators. The partnership during PM in action has built up their understanding about each other despite some negative experience they have experienced with Joe.

*W: He talked very clever... during peer mediation, he was... 'kan cheong' (anxious)... it's not his turn, then he go and help other person... (IT/PM/C3)*

*PR: So, first you have to also remember that whether he can be peer mediator, but now both of you said ok with him, means I will take it as both of you willing to work with him despite his 'macam-macam' (varied) behaviour. Do you understand? If now you tell me ok for him to be peer mediator, means you can accept him as who he is... If you are saying ok...I am ok also, if you*

*say ok, I am ok also. It's teamwork. So, of course things that he really do wrong or not supposed to do, we can tell him off la. We have to keep reminding him not to do like this lor. If not, how he can learn and change right?*  
(IT/PM/C3)

*I felt relieved to hear from Wynn and Maelyn about their willingness to accept Joe as their team mates. Even though Wynn shared her struggle with Joe, I believe she also wanted to help him. I hope they are able to build up the support among themselves as a team.*  
(D/PR/C3)

Support staff N felt good to note their effort in spending time together as a mean to understand each other better.

*N: Dulu I tak nampak dia orang makan sama-sama, sekarang seronok tengok Wynn ajak Maelyn makan... kadang-kadang Joe ajak Wynn makan sama-sama.  
(Last time I never see them eat together, now it is nice to see Wynn ask Maelyn to eat together...sometimes Joe ask Wynn to eat together).*  
(ON/SS/C2)

The review meetings that we have been through from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3 have provided time and opportunity as a means to understand about each other. We talked about our queries openly and tried to support each other's learning and understanding.

*It was good to note the peer mediators able to review the peer mediation session. We jotted down our observation based on the video, and we discussed our queries about the peer mediation. We tried to understand each other about the process of peer mediation.*  
(D/PR/C2)

Being understanding about each other has progressed through time and effort they made throughout this study. At the same time, it supported the peer mediators to apply this skill in helping the research participants to resolve their conflicts too.

### **Being aware of the need for different communication strategies.**

Throughout the study, a mixture of understanding was noted among the research participants on the roles of peer mediators due to different levels of support needed. Many of the research participants needed different kind of communication strategies as support. The peer mediators noted such needs and made their effort in reaching out to them. For instance, Wynn suggested that explanation given needed to

be simple to keep their understanding about the roles of peer mediators. For those who cannot write, she also suggested to use sign language. Joe suggested to get the research participants to draw out in pictures. These strategies were used at Cycle 2 and Cycle 3.

*W: Sign language...*

*J: Or use picture... (W agree)*

*W: Ask them to write if they know how to write*

*J: Or ask them to draw out.*

(R/PM/C1)

*W: If we explain to them simple thing, then they can understand...*

*PR: What simple thing?*

*W: What we peer mediators do... just explain in simple words. (R/PM/C2)*

From the observation at **U+Me** training, we acknowledged the need for visual support to the research participants who have communication challenges. We agreed to work out the **PM** scripts to **PM** visual scripts (Appendix C1). Peer mediators actively searched for relevant pictures to be used in the visual scripts. We then made it into cards and discussed the practicality in using it.

Support staff U commented to ask them and relate to them in story format in helping them to understand the roles of peer mediators.

*U: Kena tanya... kita kena cerita la*

*(Have to ask...we have to tell story)*

(IT/U/SS/C1)

For me, even though I have built up the relationship with the research participants before the commencement of the study, I discovered there were still some gaps among the research participants. Some research participants were active and participative whilst a few were non-verbal and passive. I used repetitive communication style in different manner in order to get them to understand the roles of peer mediators. The diversified needs have granted us a good challenge to manage

the setting in achieving the research objectives. Their ability to respond to the training was the indicator for me to note about their understanding.

*On U & Me training, most of the members could relate to the requirement, except 2 needed much more explanation and guidance. Wynn tried to support one of them, I tried to help the other one. It was not easy to support a member whose mind is not with us, even with repetition of instruction for about 3-4 times.*

*We had identifying emotion activity, and all of them could relate and name the 4 emotions.* (D/PR/C2)

I, as the practitioner researcher, need to constantly remind myself to put my perspective right, to hold on to my research objectives and to believe in their potential and abilities. Each research participant was different, my practice approach and strategy needed to be creative to adapt to their differences. This learning point was shared with the peer mediators to encourage them to start using different communication strategies in relating to the research participants.

The findings of their observation skill, flexibility, confidence, openness to express their feelings, understanding about each other and awareness of the need for different communication strategies were evident as skills learned throughout the study for conflict resolution. These skills affected their communication style during peer mediation and their daily conduct with the research participants in terms of the level of respect from the research participants. **PM** in action has seen these skills being practice as their ability in the most practical form. I believe these skills would be effective in their personal lives as young adults too.

## **In Acknowledging Support Needed**

Roles and responsibilities of peer mediators were established to provide their functions with the existing support roles from the support staff and I as the facilitator. The required skills and techniques as a peer mediator are seen as newly emerging roles to make the transition from more traditional practices where conflict was resolved by an abled third party. This means **PM** training was planned and implemented for self-advocates, in this study, the peer mediators to be re-skilled into their changed roles, which has provided good reason for young adults with learning disabilities to be equipped with the strategic, practical and technical skills.

With opportunity and time given, Wynn was able to relate to her struggle throughout the study. From her struggle, she acknowledged the support needed as she took on more responsibility in her life. She approached me as her facilitator to provide more explanation in understanding her role as peer mediator as she progressed from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. This complimented her willingness to learn for self-improvement. She acknowledged the support from me as her facilitator during peer mediation and needed encouragement to be more confident about herself.

*I was MCC (blur) in Cycle 1. The homework very hard. I don't know how to write diary. (D/W/C1)*

*I need help during Peer Mediation. JC was help RP#27 and RP#26 answer that question. JC also prompt me to asked some question. (D/W/C1)*

*I had the opportunity to sit down with Wynn to support her diary writing as she requested. I could sense her struggle to write. I also challenged her to be more confident about herself. (D/PR/C2)*

On the other hand, Joe and Maelyn have shared their struggles in relating to and understanding the research participants as peer mediators. During our group review meeting, they shared about a few members whom they found challenging.

Due to these challenges, the support provided was acknowledged and Joe found it helpful to him.

*... first game because worried how is RP#12 is going to share her name and favorite food because she cannot speak properly... But was thankful when support staff U came to the rescue to help her (member) share it with picture from a book...* (D/J/C2)

*I was thankful I and P (Support staff) had a good time of sharing together about our experience in a relaxing way.* (D/J/C2)

*Felt good sharing my thoughts and feeling with P.* (D/J/C2)

During **U+Me** training at Centre D, I supported Maelyn during the group session on I-Messages. Besides, support was given to help the research participants at Centre D to understand the rules of the games when Wynn conducted the session.

*After Wynn explained the rules of the games, I prompted the research participants to say out how to play the games. It was good to note their participation. I also supported Maelyn in getting the RPs understand the I-messages cards.* (ON/PR/C3)

In relation to the support provided by the support staff, they have noted about providing moral support to the peer mediators. They agreed they would provide necessary encouragement and practical experiences for the peer mediators to be more affluent in their practice.

*U: Encourage...*

*M: Give them more cases, ya...they need to practice more...* (IT/U/SS/C2)

During our review meeting in Cycle 2, we managed to review and analyse the peer mediation conducted without my support. Wynn expressed the need of support from me to provide support even though she tried to put in her effort.

*W: That's why I said, you no around also we don't know what to do already...*

*PR: Ok what, you did very well...*

*W: I just try only...*

*PR: Good la, that's why I don't need to be around, if I around you will...* (IT/PM/R/C2)

When asked about the type of support they needed, they would prefer the advisory role provided by me during the study including peer mediation particularly in handling problem which required much thoughts.

*W: Like you...*

*PR: Ok, what you want me to do?*

*W: Same like last time you do...just behind us and...just advisor only...you just go beside us, just talk, talk, talk only...do what, do what...*

*M: I think I also need you...maybe we do not know what to say, you can help us...*

*J:... I 100% agree with what they say... maybe we are still new, it's hard for us to expand our mind to handle our problem... (IT/PM/R/C2)*

I believe for young adults with learning disabilities, the type of support after learning a skill is about giving them the sense of assurance, as their facilitator and practitioner researcher. This sense of assurance should be kept as the key for the application of understanding and support underpinning the ability of peer mediators to resolve conflicts. When we reviewed about the level of support needed by the peer mediators, all three peer mediators appreciated the support provided by me during peer mediation. They asked for continuous support in terms of providing advice and granting them the sense of assurance.

*W: Better to have supporting staff to guide us, or be there, just standby la... during peer mediation...at least got one supporting friend...coz sometimes 3 of us blur blur... (Maelyn agreed) (IT/PM/R/C2)*

*PR: According to the planned chart, I am supposed to reduce the level of support until become like this (show them the chart). What do you think?*

*W: I think still need you...*

*PR: So, how shall I plot the chart? Like this (show the horizontal like)*

*W: Yeah (IT/PM/R/C2)*

It was depicted in Figure 4.3 in terms of the level of support. I, as the practitioner researcher needed to be critical and sensitive in providing necessary support in view of empowering them to be more confident in their endeavours and participation.

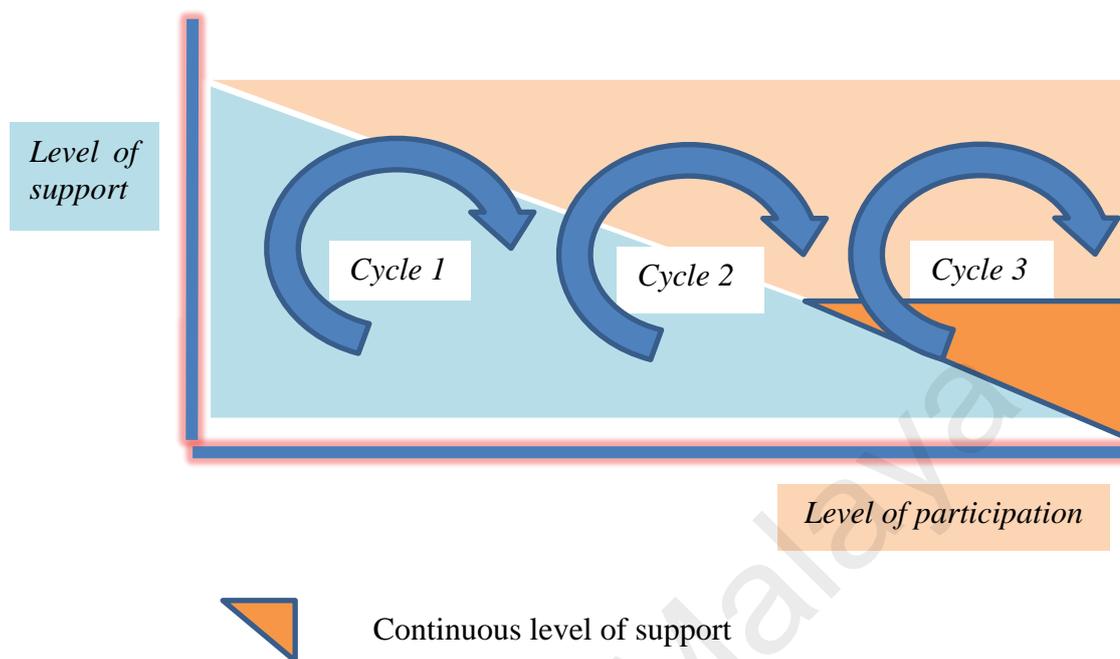


Figure 4.3. Level of participation & support

#### As A Good Role Model in Gaining Respect

Support staff described Wynn's ability in gaining respect as a peer mediator from the research participants due to her twelve-year working experience in Centre U and her active role as a self-advocate in the self-advocacy movement. This affected how she gained respect from the research participants beyond the peer mediation setting. As a supervisor, she needed to guide and support the members in completing their daily tasks.

*U: Wynn la... yang paling boleh dipercayai... berpengalaman. Wynn sangat smart sebab dia orang percaya dia kan, dia cakap mesti betul.*

*(Wynn... the most trusted... experienced. Wynn is smart because they trusted her, what she said must be right.) (N agreed) (IT/U/SS/C1)*

Undeniably, she gained respect from the support staff and the members from the way she related to and befriended them during her days working as the supervisor in Centre U. Support staff U and N observed the members have trusted her and always follow what she said.

*U: Dia orang respect dia (Wynn)... Setakat ini Wynn sebab dia orang lebih kenal Wynn ...macam Wynn...dia tau macam mana bergaul...Lebih pandai pujuk... Sebab dia jadi supervisor ...macam untuk jadi PM, saya ingat dia tak ada masalah... Dia orang boleh kawan mereka ... Dia orang respect dia... (They respect her... until now Wynn because they know her more... like Wynn... she knows how to communicate... better persuasion... because she is supervisor... to be PM, I think no problem for her... They can friend her... They respect her...)*  
(IT/U/SS/C2)

The support staff witnessed the peer mediators giving advice and guiding the research participants. This was described as the ability of research participants to listen to the peer mediators' instructions and trusted the peer mediators. Two-way relational communication took place when research participants had the chance to speak about their conflict and feelings in which Wynn has gained their respect to relate according to the needs of the members. This derived from the understanding and application of the skills learned in peer mediation on top of her comfort in relating and supporting the members.

*U: 3 orang...tengok dia apa masalah la..sebab dia 3 orang ini, semua ada kebolehan masing-masing (R-agree), semua pandai, dia pandai macam mana nak nasihat ni, pun pandai... dia boleh membimbing la...dia punya, ada kes kan...dia macam..er...tarikan, dia orang nak dengarkan mereka...ada kepercayaan...*

*(3 persons... see what problem is that... because these 3 persons, all have their skills, all clever, good at giving advice, can give guidance... when there have case right, they like can attract people to listen to them, got trust...)*  
(IT/U/SS/C1)

As her facilitator, Wynn has shown her ability in relating to the research participants. Support staff M shared about her observation in gaining respect as peer mediators. She queried about the ability of peer mediators in gaining their respect by being a good role model.

*M: ... the PM themselves need to earn the respect, betul tak (right)? Kalau mereka sendiri pun tak respect others (if they themselves don't respect others)... don't expect others to respect them...(U: ya..) which of course very obvious we see some of them have, some of them don't have la...(MF laugh). So, if a peer mediator don't, tak ada respect ahli, so bagaimana dia boleh*

*menjadi peer mediator? (... don't respect members, so how can he become peer mediator?)* (IT/U/SS/C2)

Peer mediation in action has granted the learning opportunity for the peer mediators to develop their leadership skills. Findings have shown each peer mediator has their learning capacity in their ability to resolve conflicts. This implementation has caused conflicts being resolved by the peers, rather than any other practitioners or professional. I, as the facilitator and practitioner researcher needed to understand each individual and provide specify guidance and support in developing their relationship with each other in order to strengthen the model of peer mediation using self-advocacy.

Centre U has experienced the transformation of process, and steps are taken to consider its sustainability and possibility to share this model with other self-advocacy groups in the country. This study has logged a catalogue of using self-advocacy in peer mediation, pointing to an improved environment for developing opportunities, combined with a greater potential for collaboration, sharing and exchange of experiences. This brings us in the direction of a more personal argument concerning the transforming nature of self as an instrument of research in this study. In return, they can confidently aspire to an increased personal visibility and as a result look forward to enjoying a boost to their status in life.

## **Challenges Faced**

The ability of the peer mediators has encountered challenges in its application along the learning journey as the key player among the actors of the study. Besides learning peer mediation as a new skill underpinning self-advocacy, they needed to look beyond their personal needs in giving appropriate support to their peers as peer mediators. Juggling with the various roles and responsibilities incurred challenges along the way too. Challenges became compounded with personal issues such as lack of sense of self. Peer mediators were given opportunity to speak about their challenges during the study. These challenges are divided into three segments, challenges within their personal fulfillment, challenges in building productive communication with their peers and challenges in the collaboration of shared power with the support staff and the management. From the notation in their diaries and training notes, it is seen as a form of growth for the peer mediators in facing their own challenges through peer mediation and the learning process in the study. Upon the implementation of peer mediation, challenges in the setting of self-advocacy and peer mediation as a bigger picture are being notified.

**Challenges within the personal fulfillment.** Personal fulfillment was considered as the critical growth within the peer mediators to support their ability to be an effective peer mediator. It is assessed based on the ability of peer mediators to speak up their personal limitation in view of working towards self-improvement. This was done during **PM** training and review meetings until a point of data saturation. Observation by the support staff and researcher was considered as a mean to triangulate the findings. It was acknowledged that each of the peer mediators has their own ability and limitation which included challenges in their learning journey throughout the study. **PM** training was planned to develop and

equip their sense of self besides peer mediation skill to help their peers. The learning of peer mediation in this study was put into practice as one of the evidences of the ability of peer mediators. However, the application of peer mediation was challenging to the peer mediators during practice. In the process of developing their sense of self, challenges such as self-doubt, personal resistance, detachment and rigidity were noted during the application of peer mediation skills. These challenges did not mean to add any label on the peer mediators, but they were well noted by the peer mediators upon our review meetings in achieving their personal fulfillment towards a holistic well-being. Moreover, they were constantly being reminded about progressing themselves in achieving a better sense of self as a peer mediator.

***Self-doubt.*** It was noted that every new lesson encountered by Wynn caused doubt in her when she expressed herself as being 'blur' and having 'no confidence'. When asked about the challenges she faced, she acknowledged her confusion and first experience in doing the task. She also doubted her ability in English grammar and spelling due to her learning differences. She understood about her characteristics of her disability and shared her personal struggle in sharing her problems with other friends.

*I not sure how to do this training, was difficult and MCC (blur). (D/W/C1)*

*... no confidence to do homework like Q&A. ... confused, the first time don't know how. (D/W/C1)*

*I learn about who am I. I not understand bcouz (because) confused... I feel panicky when I explain him bcouz (because) I not so good to explain so he not understand. I feel sad. (TN/W/C2)*

Self-doubt has affected other peer mediators during our review meeting on the research participants' ability in recognizing them as the peer mediators in

comparison with their checked answers. In Cycle 1, they doubted the research participants in recognising them as peer mediators.

*W: No... they don't know who is peer mediator... (IT/PM/C1 & D/W/C1)*

*M: They don't recognize us at all. (IT/PM/C1)*

*J: I think they are choosing more of the EP staff rather than us... (IT/PM/C1)*

Their doubt was challenged by me during the review meeting for them to reflect on their image and confidence as peer mediators.

*PR: Based on the tabulated finding, we could see the research participants could answer the questions. This showed their understanding. Why are you doubting about yourself because you think them couldn't recognise you all?... I think you need to be confident about yourself as a peer mediator... (IT/PM/C1)*

In acknowledging her personal struggle, Wynn could identify similar struggle with her peers to keep their problems in their heart in relation to her personal experience. But, Joe and Maelyn found it difficult to accept and note the struggle of the research participants. I noted it was due to their past schooling experience where both came from typical school setting.

*W: I feel sad many of them have their problems, I find very hard to share my own problems with other friends. I think they also have the same situation like me. It's ok to keep my problems by myself because I don't see any solution for this. (IT/R/W/C3)*

*I wondered why was it difficulty for Joe and Maelyn to note the ability of the members. It was the mindset in Joe and Maelyn which needed to be changed. Maybe because they did not go through the special education setting in their school time? Yes, both of them went through typical school setting. I guess they need time to accept the members as they are. (D/PR/C3)*

The way of self-questioning has implied Joe's self-doubt in his application in learning. I believe he needed time to rethink and reflect about what he has learned whilst building up his confidence. This caused him to always feel nervous when he was given an opportunity to relate to others. Most times, he was blocked by his self-

doubt. It was good to note his realization, but it has affected his communication style with others.

*Why am I so withdrawn – a bit persistent/insistent on my way of doing script.*  
(D/J/C2)

*Why do I not trust myself in doing things when asked?* (D/J/C2)

*Felt nervous when conducting the first game because worried how is RP#12 is going to share her name and favorite food because she cannot speak properly.*  
(D/J/C2)

Support staff M urged the peer mediators to be more confident. She suggested that peer mediators practice peer mediation more often.

*M: ....I think peer mediator, peer mediators need a lot more confidence, and need more practice la, but so far, I think er...quite good, quite ok..of course like I said, you all need more confident, more practice la... (IT/U/SS/C3)*

Support staff M continued to challenge Wynn about the experience of peer mediation and its effect. Wynn's self-confidence evolved steadily with her ability to share her observation in the peer mediation experience in Cycle 3. Wynn worried on the existing problems which did not seem to resolve completely.

*M: All the peer mediation you all did lor? So far, how do you all feel ah? Do you all feel that the peer mediation you all do got help your fellow UV members or not? in resolving the conflict...*

*Wynn: Got...have la..*

*Maelyn: Ya*

*Wynn: But not much, ok la...can help a bit lor...*

*M: Help a bit la...but why you said not much ah?*

*Wynn: Because the problem still continue right, like what you all said... (IT/U/SS/C3)*

Support staff M continued to challenge Wynn and Maelyn in knowing the reason for being recommended as peer mediators before the commencement of the study. Wynn doubted her role as she compared herself with Maelyn's confidence.

*M: Why do you think that we choose you all, the two of you...ya ya, you tell me, why do you think we choose you to be trained to be a peer mediator?*

*Wynn: I also, I also don't know..I want to know the answer*

*M: Never mind, you don't know because you either one, you have no confidence to answer, or two, you just don't want to answer, but you can answer...What is the quality of a peer mediator?*

*Wynn: You (Maelyn) have (the confidence), but I don't have yet...*

(IT/U/SS/C3)

I as the facilitator have encouraged Wynn and Maelyn many times, especially with the intention to build up their self-confidence. Wynn's answer about her self-doubt was disappointing to me in many instances. I noted a discrepancy between her words and her action which in turn she needed more time to progress.

*I felt disappointed to note Wynn's answer when asked by M about the reason for her to be chosen as peer mediator. I have explained and encouraged her to be more confident about herself. But, I know she is confident in doing, maybe not so confident when being asked and talked.* (D/PR/C3)

On the other hand, self-doubt in Joe was faced by him as his personal issue in relation to understanding his peers. He has the habit in doubting about other friends and other occasions which might not happen. This has caused worries in him, hence, affected his learning skill for peer mediation.

*Why am I so worried abt (about) other ppl's (people) problem? And why do I worry about whether my answer is correct & abt ppl's reaction to the answers...remind self not do so...reluctantly opening self...I feel curious & want to learn more abt my friends...* (D/J/C2)

*One habit of mind came up and that is to worry about what happens if there is no one wants to come (for PM training)at all. I told myself do not worry abt it. Wait till it happens then decide what to do...* (D/J/C2)

Support staff P commented on how his self-doubt had caused much confusion at the work setting. Even though they tried to explain to him, he did not seem to note their advice and try to improve on it. This caused support staff M to comment to the other staff not to trust his words at most times.

*P: He always like to confuse us, say this...say that, and make us anxious... I think he is simply say about things he doesn't know... is it call attention seeking?* (IT/SS/C2)

*M: I think his words cannot be trusted...why you all like to listen to his words?* (IT/SS/C2)

Wynn and Joe noted their self-doubt and lack of confidence in handling the peer mediation. From the above findings, self-doubt has created a learning opportunity in peer mediators to develop their self-determination skill as a progressive skill. Each of their learning pace needs different level of support in their learning path. I had to encourage them from time to time and over some individual sessions with them. Hence, I noted this challenge has given them space to grow in their relationship with others as discussed earlier. Self-determination is essential in enhancing their understanding about their role and responsibilities as a peer mediator.

***Personal resistance.*** Joe's self-doubt has affected his behaviour in terms of his resistance. Even though he was able to share his feelings over the incidents, it was noted that he showed signs of resistance to comply to what he has learned. For example, he resisted his feelings and became biased during peer mediation. I supported and guided him to be reflective about his biasness. He showed resistance over the comments and always thought he was right. It took him time to accept the comments for him to improve. It was challenging to make him understand and apply his responsibilities as a peer mediator.

*He walked off from the peer mediation to get some tissues for RP#27... He tried to soothed RP#27 when she cried...* (ON/PR/C2)

*... at most time I always being bias on one side which I know is now come to realise is a mistake on my part...* (IT/R/J/C3)

*In this PM, Joe bias to one of the disputant.* (D/M/C2)

His personal resistance was compounded by social deficit towards the ability of the research participants which needed to be corrected at most times. He commented on their limitation and related to his frustration.

*RP#13 was problematic and quite a pain in the ass... Felt sad and angry when witnessing RP#13 beat RP#27's hand... felt sorry for RP#27 and angry and confused with RP#13...It's like RP#13 wants to avoid her mistakes.* (D/J/C2)

*I felt angry...because it was wrong for him to do so especially M is involved.*  
(D/J/C2)

During PM in action, he admitted his personal resistance over his impulsive decision. Often, he reacted anxiously over the conflicts which affected the others' reaction too. At most times, he resisted to note the present situation and over-thought about matters which might not happen. This resulted in him being worried and hindered him to progress on his personal development. Moreover, his personal resistance has caused him to be disappointed with the decision to conduct and observe peer mediation.

*Was a bit disappointed when was not allowed to observe peer mediation. Why? ...Maybe it's because I might interrupt or give inappropriate comments if I observe.*  
(D/J/C2)

He needed constant reminder to hold the fort in a calm manner as a peer mediator.

*He was panic when he knew there was a conflict and peer mediation was needed. He searched high and low the peer mediation scripts and file.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

Joe tried his best to follow the instruction he prepared but he showed signs of resistance when being commented on by the support staff.

*He tried his best to explain the game. He reviewed step by step the instruction. He did not know how to support RP#7. He asked inappropriate question, and did not wait for him to answer.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

*During I-messages, he asked inappropriate questions. He think he is good.*  
(ON/SS/P/C2)

*He did not prepare the session. I prompted him to sit together with them. He needed to take more effort to understand the way of the members' communication and level of understanding. He should not ask 'are you sure?' Supported him to sum up the purpose of the games.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

Support staff K commented on his resistance during U+Me training and daily operation.

K: Joe tak bagus, nasihat dia about role, banyak-banyak cakap, dia tak dengar nasihat staff.

*(Joe was no good, gave him advice about role, he talked a lot, he didn't listen to staff.)* (IT/U/SS/C3)

The matter of his compliance has been brought up during a few monthly staff meetings. He was given chances to improve his behaviour but it did not work out. He noted the feedback from the other staff but did not know how to overcome his obstacles. There was some progress shown in Cycle 3 after explaining about his need to improve constantly with intentional encouragement from me. He reflected on his attitude problem and acknowledged his difficulty to embrace change for his own good due to fear of his past experience.

*Why do I have a don't care attitude about myself & I kpc <busybody> other ppl? I think that I have a self-denial attitude that everything I do is right & nothing is wrong with me.* (D/J/C2)

*Reasons why I don't want to open up or embrace change – scared what changes will bring – fear of past experience.* (D/J/C2)

Joe's personal resistance has caused negative reaction from the research participants particularly those who needed intensive support in their training needs. It was noted that Joe did not gain much trust from the members in Cycle 2 due to his impulsive behaviour with some of the research participants. One of the participants spoke up about his dissatisfaction on him to Wynn when Joe shouted at him. Wynn and Maelyn reported their observation over his rudeness towards the members and felt that members did not like him too but they could not relate the rationale of his behaviour.

*W: ... when he talk to RP#17 or RP#13, ah, he loud and very rude. I'm not understand why he do that... RP#16 said 'I don't like him'...*

*PR: Do you know why?*

*W: Because he disturb him... The way he talked... loud... loud and very rude... I feel EP don't like him.*

*M: Sometimes I found that Joe not realise that he is rude or loud.*

(IT/PM/R/W/MY/C3)

His personal resistance has caused misunderstanding and conflict between him and his team mates, and the support staff as one of the disputants (refer Table 4.7). The conflict between him and the support staff has highlighted his personal resistance over his previous experiences. His personal resistance over the conflicts and his anxiety were brought up by support staff M and P when he could not understand the perspective of others. He then admitted it as his personal issues and fear at his work place.

*M: Do you know what is the issue I am having with you?... How come you did not check with me about the decision you made? Do you know how I feel now? ... I am really pissed off...*  
(VI/PM/C2)

*P: When there is problem, he made his own decision without informing me as his supervisor. This is difficult because I need to arrange the work duty.*  
(VI/PM/C2)

Support staff also found Joe having difficulty to be compliant over his behaviour. They have understood his resistance and accepted him as he was. They noted the difficulty in him but find hard to understand the causes of his behaviour.

*P: Wynn and Maelyn was ok, they were willing to listen and try to learn... but I see Joe difficult to change...I don't know why, maybe last time nobody teach him...*  
(IT/SS/C3)

*U: ... susah juga tengok Joe macam ini, cakap berapa kali masih sama saja...susah mau tukar...terima saja... dia memang lama macam ini...*  
(IT/SS/C3)

The repetitive behaviour with chances to improve after consultation has caused me to divert his learning path with a different objective as compared to Wynn and Maelyn caused by his need for more communication development and perspective taking as explained earlier. It was pointed out to him that he was in denial for all these years and he did not know how to accept his personal limitation. Hence, it became overwhelming for him to accept the limitation of the other research

participants. However, it was noted that through this training, he was learning to accept himself progressively with intentional encouragement from me.

*Why am I negative feeling – not honest to myself - not open-minded – I don't know abt myself... Because if I hide, it will make me more reserved, withdrawn.*  
(TN/J/C1)

His personal acknowledgement about his personal resistance and constant conflicting mannerism within himself in relating to the research participants has brought up concern for support staff needing to decide his suitability to be a peer mediator. From the discussion and my personal reflection, I realized his level of support needs and learning style was different from Wynn's and Maelyn's due to his strong sense of resistance within himself. This brought up the point of assuming competency in him when support staff M did highlight the possible outcome.

*M: I have told you he cannot be peer mediator...*

*P: Saya rasa susah kalau dia jadi peer mediator...  
(I think it is hard for him to be peer mediator...)*  
(IT/SS/C2)

*I am truly worried for Joe. As M said, he may not be ready to be PM... but now tempted to give up on him. How to make him understand himself? He is not self-aware and self-accepted. He needs to know himself first.*  
(D/PR/C2)

I, as the facilitator believe he has dealt in denial for years, and found challenging to come to term of acceptance. I am aware of his self-doubt and personal resistance. It was depicted in the manner he wrote his diary with corrections upon corrections, trying to hide his negative emotion with positive emotion. However, I believe in his potential amidst the challenges in getting him understood his sense of self. At most times, he tended to find excuses to defend his limitation in the earlier cycles. This caused the decision for me and the research partners to allow him to take his time for personal reflection rather than involving him in the later part of our participatory action research.

*J: I admitted it is my assumption over the matter due to my previous experience...* (VI/PM/C2)

*Today conducted U&Me training with IS EP group. I did not time it properly because we finished meeting so late that we started cleaning duty late and there was not enough time to let them enjoy themselves. Few things I learned/observed:*

*1. When explaining the game, I must speak more slowly so that they can understand. I think I was a bit ~~anxious~~ excited while explaining that why I rushed. I think I should have done this at the beginning and not at the end.*

*2. I should have let them take turns to choose what name to call. Instead I took it on myself to lead. Either I was too selfish or there was not enough time for them to do so because they take a long time to choose. (D/J/C2)*

I spent individual time to ask Joe to evaluate his own session and explained to him about the way he could improve himself. He noted his learning points in Cycle 3 and acknowledged his personal limitation after being pointed out by me.

*I had an one-to-one session with him, trying to progress with him. He was very truthful this round, as I did not give much chances for him to say 'I don't know'. I wanted him to think and make up his mind. It took some time, and I waited. I was stunned and shocked at a point when he spoke up his mind to 'satisfy' my answer, so that he could keep his job. I wonder how much influence do I have, instead of him showing his effort in trying to improve himself. He said he learned it from his previous work places. I didn't know how to carry on the session, and closed the session without any further comments, because I need to reflect for answer like this. I hope he did too. (D/PR/C2)*

*Talking to him about the incident. My purpose was to help him to know himself better, and to accept himself. He gave his reasons of his action, and said he regretted his reaction... The analysis of himself differentiate the excuses he tried to give, and it always happens to him, at most incidences, he always has many excuses to defend himself. That's him. But I wanted to draw to his own comment, the first 3 words he said. It took some time for him to derive to this stage. He couldn't see it...or he didn't want to see? Or he didn't want to accept himself? (D/PR/C2)*

*It was a great relief to hear from him sharing about his inner feelings with me in the midst of his challenging days before sending him home for a break. I see it as a positive growth though I know many people are worrying for him. He was able to go into his inner feelings and related to me his personal struggles in facing his obstacles in his life. I encouraged him to persevere. (D/PR/C2)*

During the last review meeting with three peer mediators, I learned to accept his learning path was different from Wynn's and Maelyn's. I pointed out to him to view himself in a positive manner in order to move forward with much confidence. The purpose of writing diary was highlighted as an approach for them to get to know themselves better.

*PR: Ok I see that's why at the end I decided you continue on, that's why I still want you to write so but your objective is a bit different from both of them. Ok...Ya so your objective for me, for you to be in the project until now as the project closes is for you to learn to accept yourself and to have your self-awareness. (J: mmn) that is my...so if you can you know ah...share more about how you learn to accept yourself throughout all these ah then I think you have achieved something. So like you all go together suddenly I think your objective is different (J: mmn) Ya, so that's why they have to go forward.. But I think it's ok, it's ok, you don't feel bad when there is something ah... you think you are weird or you're different from them, you don't think like this, we don't think like this, I don't think like this on you, ok, so you have your thing to settle first now (J: correct). (IT/R/C3)*

In terms of resistance as a challenge, Wynn and Maelyn did not project much issue in this area except in the issue of working together with Joe. Both of them felt sad and hoped that Joe can learn to change his attitude.

*Joe was listen & talking soft... I hope he understand & change... (D/M/C3)*

*I feel sad... I wish that Joe will change his attitude. (D/M/C3)*

It was noted that they have complied to Joe's needs by providing appropriate understanding to him in our discussion about having him as one of the peer mediators.

*We talked about the issues of Joe and whether we should include him to be peer mediator in the future. I felt relieved to note positive remarks from Wynn and Maelyn. Both still would welcome him to join them as peer mediators. (D/PR/C3)*

The accommodative action of Wynn and Maelyn has been an asset for the team to move on especially in the area of supporting their team mate with different needs.

***Detachment.*** Maelyn described her peer mediation in her diary but did not share much about her thoughts in her experience. This has caused her difficulty in applying what she has learned. Below are excerpts of her reflection on sessions of peer mediation she mediated. She described her feelings over the incidents and the disputants, but not her feelings about her peer mediation experiences. This implied her detachment over her learning progress as she was not able to identify each research participants in her observation and reflection. She did not share much about her personal feelings over her peer mediation experience unlike Wynn and Joe. Instead, she shared her happiness over the resolved conflicts and sadness over the behaviour of the disputants in hope that they would not repeat the mistakes.

*Some of the EP need help from us. Next we had I-messages. Most of the EP did not use the I-messages. A few of the EP gave wrong emotion, but we told the other EP not to say anything. I feel sad because until now some of the EP still don't know how to play the games.* (D/M/C2)

*I think RP#27 is very sensitive. When we asked her about the conflict she had with RP#13, she cried. I feel happy that RP#13 finally apologise to RP#27 and RP#27 had accepted her apology.* (D/M/C2)

I expected her to progress in applying what she has learned with the constant encouragement and guidance. She needed a lot of encouragement to take on the skill in a deeper and progressive manner. She kept her frustration within herself. I did not realise it until I analysed her diary writing. She always made her effort in following the guideline. When I pointed out my expectation of her, she felt stressed and did not know what to do. It was challenging to get her to speak her mind until I spent individual time with her to explain to her my expectation for her to show her understanding and improvement. I, as her facilitator, found difficulty in supporting her to relate herself with other research participants even after pointing out the situation and the strategies to go about it.

*PR: I still see the same writing pattern and did not see any improvement...can you write more about what you have learned from the peer mediation?*

*Maelyn: I don't know what you want... how to write...* (IT/PM/C3)

*I think Maelyn has not come to term to accept herself fully. Her description has a gap. She sees herself positively but did not describe other PWLDs in a similar way. I see her wanting to project her goodself. But, in reality, knowing her for the past year, her action is what she described as PWLDs.* (D/PR/C2)

From the analysis of her diaries, I found she tended to detach herself from the others besides detaching her expression of feelings within herself.

*Went through her diary... it was interesting to read in the beginning, but after a while, I did not find much of her experience about her work, relation with the members, and about her peer mediation experiences. I wonder where do all these go?* (D/PR/C2)

I felt disappointed having to re-explain my expectation of her for the study after I noted her struggles and suggested some solutions to her. She did not take note of the suggested solution. This caused little progress in her communication skills with her peers.

*PR: I have suggested you not to write notes during peer mediation, because if you write notes, you will not listen. When you did not listen, then you will not understand the problem. But I still see you write notes, that's why very hard for you to listen to their feelings...* (IT/PM/C3)

Support staff commented about her brain surgery which may cause her to react slower and have difficulty to relating to her feelings and to others subsequently.

*M: Maybe because of her brain surgery, she is like that... cannot remember many things, and hard to talk to others...* (IT/PM/C3)

Joe shared about his detachment in his path of learning to accept himself and other peers. He dealt with questions which came to his mind within himself.

*How to make me realise I look down on people... laughing?* (D/J/C1)

*I think people with learning disability act weird because they do not act normally.* (D/J/C1)

*Why can't I differentiate between people joking and telling the truth? Why do I start arguments but never end it? Why do I call people's name but never follow up?*  
(D/J/C2)

His detachment is related to his personal resistance as his reaction towards the comments and incidents. His realization has been noted with effort to overcome it.

All three peer mediators have their abilities and challenges in different areas. As I facilitated the trainings and supported the peer mediation during the study, Wynn rarely required much support as she was able to practice and utilize the skills she has developed after some encouragement. All three peer mediators have shown self-doubt in their action and behaviour from within and towards others. It was noted that Maelyn and Joe needed different kinds of support due to their learning differences and background. The personal resistance of Joe has been a hurdle for him to move on with his life and learning path even though much advice and encouragement was provided. This included reminders to control his action and impulsive behaviour at most times. The detachment of Maelyn needed support from her partner and I to ensure the understanding of the research participants in resolving their conflicts. These challenges within the personal fulfillment were well-noted by the peer mediators and affected the building of productive communication in peer mediation.

**Challenges in building productive communication through peer mediation.**

Peer mediators reflected their experience upon peer mediation they have experienced. During our review meeting, building up productive communication was highlighted as the challenges faced by peer mediators during PM in action. This included their struggle of listening and responding, the need to understand the research participants, the need to understand the context of conflict and the dilemma in team work as the findings of their communication challenges in peer mediation.

***The struggle of listening and responding skill.***

Wynn shared her struggle to understand what they said. She was confused and felt scared when she did not know how to handle the peer mediation in relation to the background of the disputants. She acknowledged her difficulty in responding to the research participants during peer mediation even though she was the most experienced staff as compared to Joe and Maelyn.

*Response of EP not good. I feel very difficult to explain. Maybe communication problem.* (D/W/C1)

*I feel not eazy (easy) bcouz (because) I not understand what they said.* (D/W/C1)

She knew her limitation and spoke up about her fear and struggle. It took her effort to be more focused in listening during peer mediation. When asked about her challenges in relating to the members, she answered she could not understand them due to their slurred speech. Moreover, for members who are new, she needed more time to understand the background of the members and to spend more time in relating to them in order to help them with their problem.

*W: ... very hard to listen to RP#29... because her speech not clear* (IT/PM/C2)

*Wynn needed to learn to listen carefully to some words the disputant used. I asked her to take time to talk to RP#28 so that she can get familiarize with the way and words he used for his daily communication with others.*

(ON/PR/C2)

*W: I don't know what problem they talk about?*

*PR: You mean you don't know their background?*

*W: Yes...*

(IT/R/C2)

Maelyn acknowledged her inexperience in peer mediation and related it as her communication challenge. At times, she found it hard to explain to the research participants who needed intensive support. She recorded her learning experience and hoped the research participants would be able to learn and express their feelings too. She noted her need to enhance her listening skill in building up her relationship with others.

*Listen properly.*

(TN/M/C1)

*I see the IS group more difficult.*

(IT/PM/M/C2)

*I feel nervous because this is my first time doing this Peer Mediation and no experience at all.*

(D/M/C1)

*I feel difficult to explain. Maybe communication problem.*

(D/M/C1)

Due to her work responsibility and her work station which was situated on the first floor of the centre, her opportunity to relate with the research participants was limited. She was encouraged to make her own effort and spend time with them during her lunch hour. Support staff agreed that Maelyn's time spent and physical presence with the research participants affected her relationship with the research participants. Support staff P noted her passiveness during her time spent with the research participants.

*U: Maelyn mungkin kurang sikit sebab dia tak biasa dengan dia orang... dia tak biasa dekat bawah, budak pun tak selalu tengok dia...*

*(Maelyn maybe lesser because she is not used to them, she is not used to downstairs, they don't see her often...)*

(IT/U/SS/C2)

*P: She just stood there...keep quiet only...she did not speak to the others, maybe she don't know what to say to them.* (ON/U/SS/C2)

Maelyn's struggle to listen and response in her communication skill was noted to be related to her circle of support when we discussed it during PM training. It was noted that her circle of support was refined within her immediate family and some colleagues only (Appendix A3). I noted the limited exposure of her life would be an area for her to improve and explore in her relationship with others. In her application in peer mediation, this caused her inability to be aware of the disputants' needs. It gave her challenges to listen and response to their needs without support from me.

*She followed the structure given, and write accordingly. I felt interesting to read her diary, as she shared her personal and family matters. She needs to sharpen her thinking skills, in relation to her emotion.* (D/PR/C2)

*M's circle does not have many people, also as expected, for me, she is still fairly young as compared to the Wynn and Joe. There was not much exposure in her life too as she spends most of her time with her family only.* (D/PR/C2)

Based on my observation, even though the support staff have encouraged her to spend more time with the research participants, I saw the notion of her difficulty in doing so. During PM in action, she struggled and remained in need of support.

*She was able to answer my questions but I did not see her improvement in talking and relating to EP members... Talked to her about learning to develop her thinking skill at a level, more than just seeing the situation, but more on her feeling... She is teachable and more willing to learn.* (D/PR/C2)

*She did not know how to handle RP#13. She did not have much eye contact, did not note disputant's reaction before continuing to show the visual script...* (ON/PR/C2)

Joe shared the struggle in relating to the research participants especially in getting across their messages to them. He described his frustration over the peer

mediations he conducted especially in Cycle 1 when he found challenging to communicate with the disputants.

*RP#24 was very hard to get her to tell her problem...feel frustrated at times.*  
(D/J/C1)

*RP#5 very reluctant to talk or agree or open up... feel frustrated at getting RP#5 to agree...*  
(D/J/C1)

Support staff U commented about his relationship with research participants was not visible. However, she noted his inexperience and believed when given time, he would be able to relate better with the research participants.

*U: J punya pergaulan saya rasa kurang sikit la...*

*(J's communication I think less a bit...)* (N-agree). (IT/U/SS/C1)

Support staff N noted he needed encouragement and guidance in his daily production at work. He could relate to members who are able to speak up and relate, not to those with limited speech and communication challenges.

*N: Masa kita ada kerja, bagi dia tugas, kita kena galakkan ..kena ajar dia... Sampai dia tak ada kerja, dia tengok EP... Tapi I tengok macam you punya student tu, macam dia lebih bergaul la...*

*(When we have work, we assigned to him, we have to encourage, have to teach him... when he doesn't have work, he looked at EP... But I see like your students, he can communicate.)*  
(IT/U/SS/C1)

The notion of him needing guidance to form his circle of support implied his relationship with others was not in place as expected. In analyzing his circle of support, he took effort in naming the people in his life. I prompted him to think deeper about the 'real' relationship with the people he has named (Appendix A4). At most times, he found it difficult to come into the real term.

Support staff M acknowledged the lack of listening skill in young adults with learning disabilities which she was happy to note their learning of listening skill through peer mediation for both the research participants and the peer mediators.

*M: I think it help that they actually have an outlet to...express themselves, because definitely they need people to listen to them, when they express, ada orang dengar mereka, ada PM to hear out mereka. (U&R: Ya ya...) So, be able to express and for people to listen to them (U&R: Mmn..) So, from there, they themselves also learn how to listen... (U: Ya) I think the listening skill is very lacking... (IT/U/SS/C2)*

Listening and responding skills are essential skills in peer mediation. As they are aware of the importance and their struggles with these skills, it showed implication for the peer mediators to keep on learning and trying whilst support staff to keep on providing appropriate support for them to learn.

***The need to understand the research participants.*** Peer mediators faced challenges in understanding the research participants during U&Me training. The slow reaction of the research participants has indicated the need for more time in their learning where peer mediators needed to understand and adjust. This was noted by Maelyn and Joe upon our review meeting. They were encouraged to continue their effort, for example, call their name, repeat the instruction and observe their reaction to check their understanding. They were asked to support one another during the training.

*M: Some of the EP a bit slow and blur. When I said a fruit name for example watermelon, some of the EP need to be told to stand up and sit another chair. Some of the EP did not change his/her sitting place. (ON/C2)*

*J: RP#1 very slow in reaction. He does not understand what to do or what. (ON/C2)*

*We discussed about the slow reaction of a few identified research participants and how could we provide appropriate support to help them understand the games in U&Me training. RP#1 needed physical prompt at most time. RP#7 and RP#17 needed more individual instructions but they could understand simple, clear instruction. (R/PM/C2)*

Maelyn too found it challenging to understand some of the research participants especially those who have different communication needs. She could make observation and describe the research participants during U&Me training, but

she did not know what to do to improve her relationship with them except feeling sad for them. Her pre-assumption on the ability of research participants has hindered her from making further effort in improving the relationship with them.

*When RP#7 turn, he can't remember any happy moment. I feel sad for him.*  
(ON/M/C1)

*When it is RP#26 turn, she don't know how to act happy moment. She acted very weird...*  
(ON/M/C1)

*... they (the research participants) don't know what we are doing...*  
(IT/PM/R/C1)

*I feel sad because both of them don't want to say out all their problem. I hope the other EP will tell us the conflict happen without keeping it ownself.*  
(D/M/C2)

During **U&Me** training, Maelyn followed and read the instructions as she had prepared. She was prompted to repeat the rules without looking at her notes to improve on her understanding with the research participants.

*She read the instruction prepared by herself without looking and sensing the understanding of the RPs. I prompted her to check whether the RPs understand the game, and asked her to explain again without reading from the paper.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

*She sat and joined the session. She did not show any sign of her engaging herself with the others.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

*She needed to practice more, learn to give instruction by not looking at the paper.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

During **PM** in action, she followed the script without showing understanding with the research participants in her communication during peer mediation. This has added to her struggles to utilize the learning opportunity to understand the research participants.

*Maelyn could not explain the rule to RP#5. I helped her to rephrase the rule, and she repeated after me. I prompted her to rephrase what RP#5 said to make sure RP#5 understand what he needed to do. She followed my prompting.*  
(VI/PM/PR/C1)

*Maelyn read the rule of peer mediation without observing the reaction of RP#17. RP#17 did not listen, he closed his eyes. When she showed the PM visual scripts, she did not observe whether RP#17 pay attention to the scripts. I prompted Maelyn to help RP#17 to come out with his solution.*

(VI/PM/PR/C2)

*Maelyn read the rules as required without checking the ability of disputant's understanding. She did not know how to probe the disputant to tell their problem. I prompted her to repeat the problem shared by RP#27.*

(VI/PM/PR/C2)

Support staff U noted her lack of experience and relationship in terms of understanding the research participants. I provided much prompts for her during PM in action and interviews with the research participants for her to learn to understand the research participants.

*U: Maelyn mungkin kurang sikit sebab dia tak biasa dengan dia orang...*

*(Maelyn could be less because she is not used with them...)* (IT/U/SS/C1)

*She did not know how to relate to RP#13. I intervened to help her to handle RP#13.*

(ON/PR/C2)

*She prompted Wynn to explain to RP#29 about peer mediation. She could not explain when Wynn needed help to speak in Mandarin. She tried to help. She read the script accordingly without much eye contact to get their understanding. She needed to learn to be more flexible instead of just following the script.*

(ON/PR/C2)

*She just read from the interview scripts. She did not know how to probe more questions to get the interviewees answer the questions. I intervened and explained to the interviewees. I think she needs to improve her listening skills.*

(ON/PR/C2)

Joe also shared about his personal struggles in relating to the research participants, he was overwhelmed by their limitations and felt frustrated when he found it challenging to understand them. There was a gap for him to understand the background of the research participants especially those with communication challenges. I have been guiding and explaining to him some strategies to understand the research participants, but, it was not visible in his action. He perceived them but

did not understand and showed no interest instead of relating their action with their learning challenges when most times he needed more support during U4Me training.

*I feel RP#7 was not interested at all because his body language shows he is not interested at instructions given, and he never face Wynn when she gave instruction even when the game played, he was not fast in reaction.*

(D/J/C2)

*Role-play conflict – most of them showed interest in it except for RP#7 and RP#17. Asking them to watch also was frustrating, like they are not interest at all.*

(D/J/C2)

*RP#1 very slow in reaction ...he does not understand what to do...*

(D/J/C2)

Referring to Joe, support staff P observed and shared his concern and highlighted the importance of understanding and gaining trust from the research participants which Joe was not able to.

*P: Saya ingin cakap ah...kalau ahli tak percaya pada PM, yang masalah itu susah nak dijelaskan, dia cuma mari saja, dan PM already, lagi boleh repeat, same problem, so kepercayaan itu mustahak.*

*(I want to say... if members don't trust PM, this problem hard to explain, when he comes and PM already, still will repeat same problem, so, trust is important.)*

(IT/U/SS/C2)

Support staff M commented about her disappointment over his effort in getting to understand the research participants during the training and at the work setting. It was difficult to note the conflicting self in him in demanding more from the research participants but he could not make it as she had expected.

*M: ... as the facilitator right, you all also should understand your... your participants. So your expectation and understanding ah... participant also very important ya... You know some of them is like you expect this want but they behave like but then they don't. This one behave like that, I am disappointed... this is a matter whether you all understand your participant or not...*

(IT/U/SS/C3)

Joe and Maelyn were challenged by their understanding on the research participants when they realized the inability of the research participants' to understand what they said. I noted this relates to their thinking skill which is linked

to their reflective skill in their daily lives. This also relates to their past background where Joe and Maelyn grew up in a typical school setting until they joined Centre U.

*It was not easy to explain to them writing involves with thinking. I guess this is their problem, to think. It's not something new, as I found that most of the time of their life, they hardly have chances to think. For example, decision in daily chores, how much opportunity was given to them to think and make decision? How much chances were given for self-advocacy? All these require thinking.*  
(D/PR/C1)

The support staff held the same perception over the understanding of research participants in the roles of peer mediators. Support staff M felt that there were some participants who needed more time to understand the role of peer mediators. This was related to U&Me training where some did not understand the purpose of the game.

*M: ... maybe some of them take a bit longer time to understand what you all trying to do la. So sometimes the U & Me the games you all played maybe for some of them it might work, maybe for some of them it might not work...*  
(IT/U/SS/C3)

In guiding and supporting the research participants in understanding the roles of peer mediators, it took time, effort and constant reminders for peer mediators and support staff. The implication affirmed the ability to understand the roles of peer mediators when the environmental factors are cultivated to allow the understanding to take its position.

***The need to understand the context of conflict.*** In peer mediation, peer mediators needed to understand the context of each conflict which might be different. Due to her detachment, Maelyn encountered challenges in understanding the context of conflict. She was not able to be flexible in her action by paying more attention to relate to the disputant. Her forgetfulness and slowness in her action has made her need more time to understand the context of the conflict. Even though she made her effort in writing down notes during peer mediation, it has hindered her

communication style in understanding the conflict setting which needed active listening during peer mediation. I have brought up to her attention about her limitation and suggested for her to make more effort in her active listening. I believe with more practice, she should be able to familiarize herself with the script.

*She was not able to summarise the problems shared by the disputant. I helped her to rephrase the problems one by one as shared. Disputant shared the feelings, she did not intervene.*  
(ON/PR/C2)

Joe often showed his struggle to understand the conflict too due to his personal resistance and communication challenges in his social perspective and impulsive behaviour. His impulsive behaviour was noted during peer mediation where he ranted due to his frustration when the disputants could not understand the purpose of peer mediation.

*He felt frustrated and almost wanted to give up during peer mediation. He was guided to repeat and explain the purpose of peer mediation to the disputant.*  
(ON/PR/C1)

*M: ...just a tag...flexibility there (laugh) because I know, you all, I know you all got a fix set of questions ask, I know, that's good, it's a guideline, but sometimes you have to see the situation lor, ah...like, of course I'm sure they are like one or two cases where there's is out of er... situation right?*  
(IT/U/SS/C3)

It was important to note the need to understand the context of conflict. The challenges faced by the peer mediators implied the need for support until they are able to show the understanding by providing appropriate support. However, the teamed peer mediators have helped the peer mediation to achieve its purpose, but some dilemmas of team work were noted.

*The dilemma of team work.* The differences in the peer mediators abilities and limitations have seen dilemma in building up their team work. They were given the opportunity to give their constructive comments with one another during review meetings.

Joe's personal resistance also caused tension in the working relationship with Wynn. Wynn felt stressed at times when he seemed to argue with her at work and did not listen to her advice. Moreover, Joe's personal resistance has caused confusion and affected his working relationship with Wynn.

*He said silly question. I feel lost.* (TN/W/C2)

*I do peer mediation with Joe 4 times, he away nervous (always nervous) & he can't wait he durn (turn). He like ask question not in the Peer Mediation Slip (Script), I felt angry & disappointed to him.* (D/W/C3)

*He was... 'kan cheong' (anxious)* (IT/R/C3)

*... so I was sitting there, I was observe la, so, huh...why Joe give instruction like that... I don't know la, so I was tell Joe, I already told him twice, can you please ask them what they do, and can you repeat what they say. He didn't...I feel stressed...* (IT/PM/W/C3)

Maelyn found the same challenges in working with Joe as her partner during peer mediation. Often, she was confused over his impulsive behaviour during peer mediation.

*Joe always say something without thinking. I feel confuse.* (TN/M/C2)

*... he love to...how to say...interrupt (W: Ya)* (IT/R/W/MY/C3)

On the other hand, Joe also felt frustrated in working with Maelyn. For instance, Joe felt frustrated to have to wait for Maelyn to flip her visual scripts and write her notes during peer mediation. Maelyn was confused when Joe moved on beyond the script. Both of them had received explanations about the importance of working together as peer mediators. I guided them to note the disputants' needs and the peer mediators needed to decide the need to use visual script before peer

mediation. The challenge of using the visual scripts was noted for improvement. Peer mediators were advised to select a few relevant visual scripts before peer mediation.

*I feel frustrated a few times when Maelyn lost track of where she is during the session because she was writing notes... I felt frustrated to wait for Maelyn to flip the visual scripts. She did not take note of my instruction. I needed to prompt her.* (D/J/C2)

*I was not aware of him going so fast...* (IT/M/C2)

*Maelyn was writing down what they said because she always thinks that she will forget. But I see that she took some time to write, and at some point, she miss what the disputant said. We discussed how she needed to change her writing style, and came out with another form for her or them to scribble. We also thought of selecting certain important visual scripts before peer mediation.* (D/PR/C2)

In Joe's diary, he noted he could not appreciate the support given by Wynn and commented it as conflicting to him. Maelyn's passive action during his session made him speculated about her way of support at times. He did not trust either of them. This caused the dilemma with his team mates. Even though he realized the dilemma after being explained to, he did not gain much trust from his team mates too.

*I feel angry and disappointed when Joe said that Wynn and I can't help him to change his own habits. I learn that it is very rude when somebody ask you question, you did not answer. I wish that Joe won't repeat that again.* (D/M/C2)

I reminded Wynn and Maelyn about his conflict coping style from PM training, Wynn learned to accept him as he is though Maelyn was disappointed at times.

*W: That is Joe lor, that is Joe...* (IT/R/C3)

*M: I feel sad. I wish that Joe will change his attitude.* (D/M/C3)

Support staff noted the need to build up the peer mediators' communication skills among themselves in view of supporting one another. This was observed during U4Me training in Cycle 2, where the peer mediators needed to look into

their team work in preparation for the training. Support staff P suggested having regular discussion meetings which should enhance their relationship in supporting one another.

*P: Dan lagi satu, PM, dia orang kan, J, W dan M, dia orang selalu mau ada communication yang baik, apa macam pergi handle ahli-ahli yang ada masalah, so, selalu dia orang kena meeting atau bincang buat apa, sekarang step 1, step 2, step 3, apa macam, kena bercakap bila tanya soalan dengan lancar, dia boleh terus... dan PM kena satu orang support satu orang, bila dia orang buat soalan macam, dia kena support, ini kena kasi tau, kalau tak ada, ada sikit...(U:masalah...)... so ahli yang ada masalah, pun blur, jadi problem...*

*(And one more, the PM, J,W, and M, they need to have good communication with each other, how to handle members who have problem, so, they have to meet frequently or discuss what to do, step 1, step 2, step 3, what to do, have to talk, ask better question, continue... and PM have to support one another, when one ask question, the other has to support, this have to let them know... if not, got a bit (U:problem)...so members have problem also blur, become problem...)* (IT/U/SS/C3)

Support staff M suggested that peer mediators must learn about team work and how to respect one another. This helped them in understanding the needs of the research participants where regular discussion might be helpful too. It could start from *U+Me* training when they were given the opportunity to conduct the games.

*M: So, the PM also must learn teamwork, respect each other also...* (IT/U/SS/C2)

*M: ... so the mediators err must discuss and see for some of them who does not understand so much if it does not work is there another way to make them understand la. so the mediators err must discuss and see for some of them who does not understand so much if it does not work is there another way to make them understand la.* (IT/U/SS/C3)

I have noted the dilemma of team work between the peer mediators during peer mediation. Regular review meetings were conducted with the intention to build up their working relationship. However, I believe the effort and initiative must come from them to see the real impact of their team work.

*I arranged lunch out together. I needed to prompt them to talk to each other. Looks like they still don't know how to ask each other question. Or is it because I was there? After giving some suggestion, they became more relax,*

*and commented the lunch outing was good. I hope they have more initiative to want to spend time with one another.* (D/PR/C2)

The dilemma of team work among the peer mediators was noted with much support and encouragement from the support staff and I. As the peer mediator understood their roles, the progress of their team work showed improvement. They became more relaxed and open with one another.

To achieve productive communication has always been a typical challenge for young adults with learning disabilities, including the peer mediators in this study. The points brought up by the peer mediators highlighted the core need of productive communication, which lies in their personal perspective in application to their social perspective in relation to other individuals. Even though they have learned about different emotions, it took time and effort for them to apply these emotions in their daily encounters. Communication is relational and it comes from within. It started from the struggle to listen and provide appropriate response by the peer mediators to the need to understand the research participants and the context of conflict. The dilemma of team work affected the effort in building productive communication between and among the peer mediators. I, as the practitioner researcher have given the peer mediators ongoing support and encouragement to make intentional action to spend time with the research participants. Their effort in this relational building is believed to develop their communication skills as an effective peer mediator. Progress was seen when effort was put in.

### **Challenges in collaboration of shared power.**

To implement peer mediation as a possible service by and for young adults with learning disabilities, it is essential to share power and gain support from the management of the organization. It is because from the onset, peer mediation involves time and effort in the operation setting. Both research partners and I felt disappointed when the opportunity for us to provide our knowledge and experience was not welcomed by the management of Centre D. We understood the organization has its mission and operation for people with learning disabilities, but felt that this has deprived the self-advocacy skills in its development. We thought the support from the management is important in progressing self-advocacy and peer mediation as a service for their members.

*Wynn: I feel sad & hard to get other SA groups to join the peer mediation training... I don't know why they can't come...maybe they don't know what is peer mediation...I talked to Ms Lee from Kind Centre, she said no staff to come.*

*PR: Peace Centre said will discuss and let us know. The PIC asked us to call again next week.*

*Maelyn: I think they are busy with their own thing... (IT/R/C2)*

During the interview with support staff G, I suggested the need to practice what the peer mediators have learned, but the staff felt hard to carry it out in action without support from the management. Moreover, the daily activities of the centre affected the training and practice opportunity.

*G: ...itu la from 2.15pm, practice and practice... Itu tarian, not this thing...usually I nak bawa dia orang pergi sana (for training) pun is need the permission from Ms Ming. That's why Ms Ming said it's not effective, macam some sort like waste of time.*

*(... this from 2.15pm, practice and practice...the dance, not this thing, usually I need to bring them over (for training) also need to get permission from Ms Ming.) (IT/D/SS/C3)*

Given these observations, it became a shortcoming in the research design where research participants from Centre D were not interviewed. The Director from Centre D commented that the members were not ready for this practice in the centre.

*PR: (After U&Me training)... We can come to teach again the members about peer mediation...*

*Director D: I think the members here are not ready for it yet, let's keep it as it is now...* (IT/SS/C3)

Support staff G added the issue of promoting self-advocacy in the centre D. He used to conduct self-advocacy meetings once a month in the past with some topics but could not relate the application by the members in their setting.

*G: Last time I used to have..err..what you call that? Once in 2 weeks, the self-advocacy meeting, put it once a month only... (R acknowledging)...they said week after week ah, is you understand the topic we bring it ah, later they cannot express...I don't know why (R acknowledging)... ya, self-advocacy, various topic I bring it...* (IT/D/SS/C3)

Based on the interview data, I noticed the staff focused on the behaviour of the peer mediators instead of their abilities and potential. The notion of ignorance about their learning disability has been mind blogging for many of the practitioner, including the support staff from Centre D.

*G: I tak tau la, why dia orang punya mentality ahh...very low itu la... ours one, is ahh...cakap explain pun susah...banyak jahat... they can twist and turn...*

*(I don't know, why their mentality very low... ours is ahh.... say explain also very difficult... very naughty...)* (IT/D/SS/C3)

*It was an interview cum staff training at Centre D. I explained again the rationale of peer mediation to the staff. They were able to share with me the conflict happened in their centre and how there were managed by the staff and Director. I wish the Director would be able to see the need to promote self-advocacy, and now peer mediation.* (D/PR/C3)

It was challenging to convince the staff about the positive effect of peer mediation when there was different perspective in mind even though they might have many years of working experience in the same setting. In collaboration of shared

power, the mindset and perspective of support staff are critical in achieving equilibrium in its application. I understood their situation and thought that self-advocacy is not about teaching, but practice and practice with appropriate support. It is only in the real practice that young adults with learning disabilities are given the opportunity to speak up. It is about the collaboration of shared power between the support staff and the young adults where self-advocacy becomes relevant in their lives.

*It was hard to note about the issues of self-advocacy in Centre D. During U+Me training, I saw so much potential for self-advocacy and peer mediation. After interview with the support staff, I saw another facet of thinking. Even the support staff tried to practice self-advocacy in the centre, but there is still belief that they need to control the members due to their behavioral issues. For me, when staff are controlling, whether or not with the best of interest of the members, self-advocacy cannot prevail its implication... now I am not sure how to foresee whether the members are ready to take on the role of self-advocacy, whether readiness is measured by us as professional or by the exposure and opportunity given to them to experience it...*  
(D/PR/C3)

The power of support staff over the members in Centre D has provided sufficient data to note the dilemma in the self-advocacy movement. The research partners and I believe the perception of the support staff was different from the research participants. This accounted for future action in dealing with other self-advocacy groups in ensuring the commitment and being open for collaboration. Support from the stakeholder is much needed to achieve a coherent approach in managing the development of self-advocacy and peer mediation. This implicates an improved awareness of each individual's needs which could lead to an enhancement of the guidance provided for the use of and development of self-advocacy and peer mediation.

The challenges faced and expressed by the peer mediators have allowed me as the practitioner researcher and facilitator to check the appropriateness of the

training plans with relevant support to achieve a holistic development of the individual as a peer mediator. Each of the peer mediators has their abilities and limitations. It was an uphill task for them to be all-rounded. But, it was possible to complement each other's strength and limitation as a team. At some point, more in-depth support was needed during review on personal development beyond the technical support of peer mediation. One-to-one guidance sessions were required to ensure that the training content was relevant and meaningful. For me personally, it has given me the challenge to weave the dynamic of each of their abilities amidst limitation in different perspective within the same setting. It was a complication within simplicity.

The application of peer mediation achieves its meaning within the peer mediators as they make the practice real, as well as the support staff and I, as the facilitator and practitioner researcher for this study. The challenges faced by the peer mediators were noted and acknowledged by each of them. It created a progressive learning for each of them in learning to know themselves and embrace themselves from their varied background and past experiences. Subsequently, there would be avenue to explore the potential within them amidst the challenges and approach in learning. It is about building up their team spirit to make an impact in each other's lives. Hence, learning is a journey which counts on opportunity, support and collaboration. A summary chart is depicted in Figure 4.4 on the ability of peer mediators and its challenges.

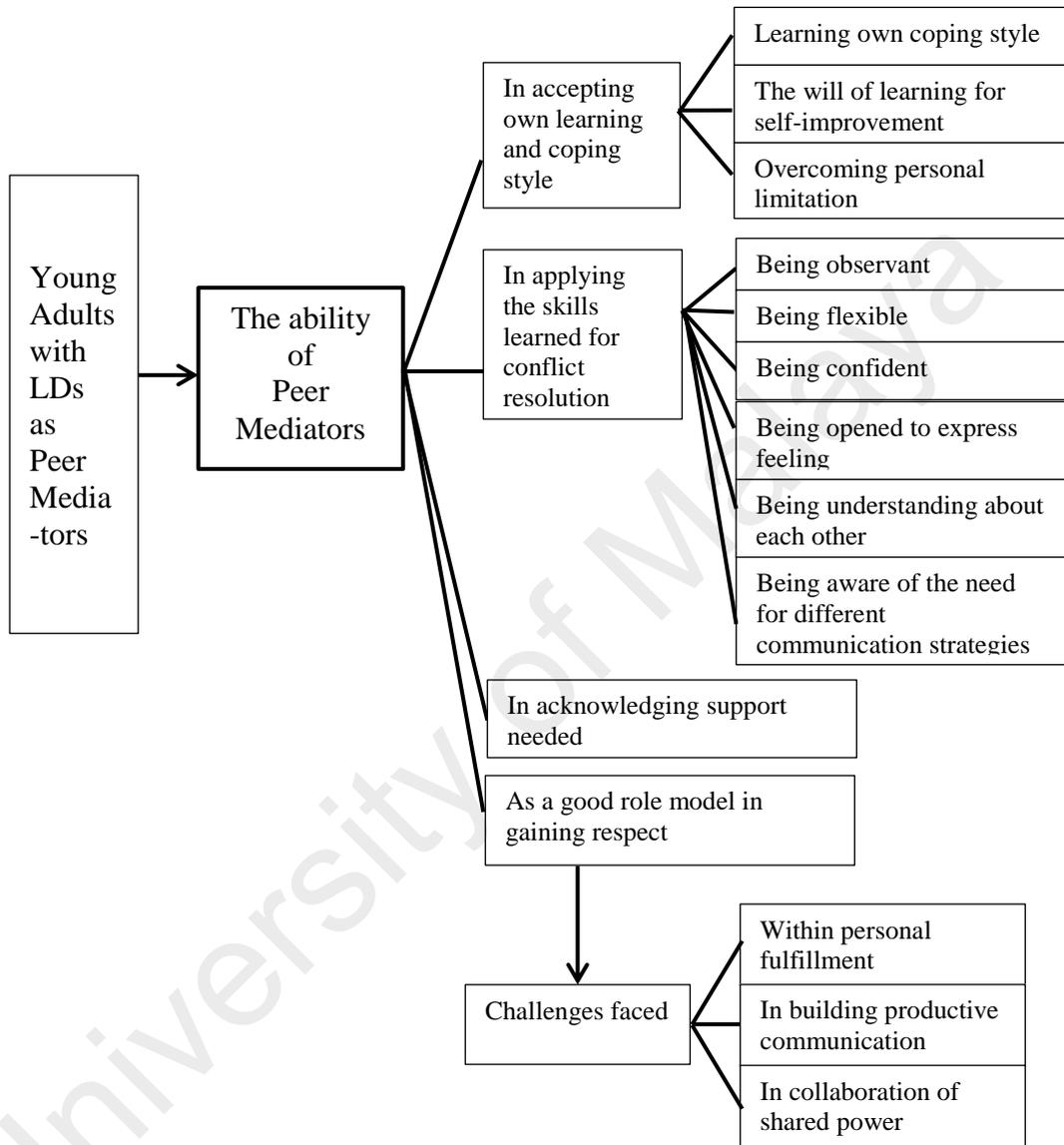


Figure 4.4. Summary chart of the findings on the ability of peer mediators

## **The Roles of Self-advocacy in Peer Mediation**

Research question 3 focused on the roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation in its practical term. The epistemological position of this question reflected on the roles of self-advocacy in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities to achieve quality of life and quality of support. This requires a critical and creative element in achieving possibilities through peer mediation for the research participants and the peer mediators. The findings are based on the response of research participants on the skills and the effect of conflict resolution in relation to the effect of their personal development as the impact. In this study, peer mediation has provided opportunity for young adults with learning disabilities to speak up and practice their rights. Besides, it has given the peer mediators the opportunity to solve their own conflict among their peers. It has also given the peer mediators the opportunity for leadership development. Inevitably, the findings showed that peer mediation has improved the quality of life of young adults with learning disabilities with the quality of support provided throughout the study which is equally important in the self-advocacy development.

### **‘For Us to Speak Up and Practice Our Rights’**

From the recorded PM Log Sheets, 7 research participants attended PM in action throughout the 3 cycles and were interviewed in Cycle 3 by the research partners. The interview data showed their self-advocacy skills being practiced and applied in relation to their skills for conflict resolution. They spoke up and understood the function of peer mediation in conflict resolution. Their participation in peer mediation has magnified the role of self-advocacy in its application in the real setting.

‘Speak up’ was the most checked answer as the skill for conflict resolution in Centre U in Cycle 1 (Table 4.7). It is followed by ‘don’t talk to him/her’ as their personal strategy, some would ‘call for help’ and ‘tell my mother’. Though research participants provided different answers, the point is they are able to speak up and practice their rights to choose their best answer. These findings have envisioned the roles of self-advocacy in providing opportunity for the young adults to express their understanding in relation to conflicts. As they learned and understood about the role of peer mediators, the notion of speaking up remained as the answer by the research participants in Cycle 2. It affirmed the roles of self-advocacy which has been instilled and practiced in their knowledge and life.

In Centre D, personal strategy, ‘don’t talk to him/her’ was the most checked answer as a strategy when they encountered conflicts with friends. The roles of self-advocacy comparatively in Centre U and Centre D showed some level of difference. Centre U has been practicing and promoting self-advocacy as their core service to the members as a self-advocacy organisation whilst Centre D is still in need for improvement in term of self-advocacy development as a service organization as the notion of speaking up was noted by 3 research participants only.

Table 4.7

*The Skills for Conflict Resolution*

Skills	Cycle 1 (Centre U)	Cycle 2 (Centre U)	Cycle 3 (Centre D)
Cry	1	4	2
Speak up	12	11	3
Go away	5	6	1
Call for help	8	NA	2
Scold him/her	0	7	2
Don’t talk to him/her	10	5	8
Tell my mother	7	4	1
Don’t know	0	1	1
Look for peer mediators	NA	10	2

Wynn was confident to note the ability of research participants to speak up by themselves. Joe affirmed his opinion based on his observation about the need to speak up as a means to resolve conflicts, especially for young adults with learning disabilities.

*W: They can speak by themselves.* (IT/PM/C3)

*J: ...that might be a way of releasing their feelings out... but speaking out verbally I feel is so much better option...* (IT/J/C3)

During the interview with the research participants in Cycle 3, the research partners and I were impressed by their response on the skills they have learned about peer mediation and conflict resolution. Their answers about skills for conflict resolution have provided evidence of the roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation for conflict resolution. RP#17 was prompted using visual cards but choices were given to him to practice his rights and he was able to speak up. The others were able to speak up and relate their experiences in their own words based on their understanding and experience. RP#17, RP#24, RP#27 and RP#29 related speaking up as their skill for conflict resolution. This included RP#26 and RP#28's acknowledgement about getting to communicate better through peer mediation.

*RP#17: Speak up... (with visual prompt)* (VI/PM/C/C3)

*RP#24: Speak up* (VI/PM/SM/C3)

*RP#26: ... how to communicate better* (VI/PM/S/C3)

*RP#27: Talk to peer mediator* (VI/PM/MY/C3)

*RP#28: To talk, to see, to listen, to focus and behave* (VI/PM/R/C3)

*RP#29: Talk to him (my friend)* (VI/PM/MK/C3)

Wynn acknowledged the self-advocacy skills learned by the research participants during peer mediation where they were able to speak and share their feelings.

*... but when they see the peer mediation, that means they can say feelings (M: mn), they can know (MY: share out their problem) ah, they know each other you angry me is why (M: mm) then you sad is why (M: mm) then that means they already say out, then they make friend, so that means is good for them to know the person's feelings la...* (IT/U/SS/C3)

For Joe and Maelyn, they acknowledged peer mediation has given them the opportunity to speak up too. Peer mediation has helped them to speak up about their problems as their personal development.

*J: Speak up...* (IT/PM/C2)

*M: Peer mediation can help me to speak up, whenever I have problem... now I speak up more compared to last time...* (IT/PM/C2)

For support staff, they agreed that peer mediation has given the research participants a safe avenue to share their problem and resolve their conflicts. The avenue to speak to peers is seen as more comfortable as compared to speaking to the staff.

*U: Tapi I rasa macam ini bagus, macam dia ada PM ni, kita macam, kita tak segan nak keluar nak cakap...*

*(But I feel like this is good, like they have PM, we like, we don't feel shy to come out and speak)*

*PR: Macam suasana lebih senang...untuk mereka  
(It's like an easier situation... for them)*

*U: Ya...kata nak jumpa orang atas, kita rasa macam segan nak cakap...masalah boleh cepat solved.*

*(Ya, say want to see people above, we feel shy to talk... problem can be solved faster)* (IT/U/SS/C2)

'Speak up' is noted as the visible skill of self-advocacy to practice their rights. Not only the research participants were given the opportunity to speak up, it has enhanced their communication skills too. This included the peer mediators in speaking up and responding to the need to resolve conflicts.

### **‘For Us to Solve Our Own Conflict’**

In Table 4.7, research participants could identify their role to look for peer mediators as one of the skills for conflict resolution in Cycle 2. Wynn and Maelyn noted and felt happy for the research participants’ ability to look for peer mediators when they need help. This provided them the opportunity to solve their peers’ conflict.

*RP#17: ... look for Peer Mediator* (VI/PM/C/C3)

Other answers provided by the research participants have shown their understanding about peer mediation to help them with their problem.

*RP#17: ... call for help...* (VI/PM/C/C3)

*RP#26: How to solve problem with friend...* (VI/PM/S/C3)

Wynn and Maelyn felt happy and relieved noting the response given in the questionnaire and the answers from the interviews of research participants. This has granted them confidence in carrying out their roles as peer mediators besides enhancing the role of self-advocacy. Joe noted he was learning to handle the conflict better.

*W: They think peer mediators can help them. I feel happy they can look for peer mediator if they need.* (IT/PM/R/C3)

*M: They more understand the role of peer mediator in Cycle 2. I feel glad they know when there is problem, they know how to look for peer mediator. It’s good to know when they have problem, they can talk to their friends. So that their problem can be solved.* (IT/PM/R/C3)

*J: ...and also handle conflict issue a bit more better...* (IT/PM/R/C2)

Wynn witnessed her role in helping the research participants to solve their conflicts besides having the chance to relate to their friends. She felt great about this role. Subsequently, it has created a respectful atmosphere to help one another.

*W: Peer mediation helped me to prompt them (disputants) to share their problem...*

*PR: So, how you feel by helping with their problem?*

*W: Great, at least I can help them...* (IT/PM/R/C2)

*W: I see there was not so much quarrel in Cycle 2, and they respect their friends, and help each other also.* (IT/PM/R/C3)

I believe the research participants were enriched in **U&Me** training where the emphasis taken was on the opportunity to look for peer mediators when they have conflict. The choices of their answers have granted us, the researcher, the peer mediators and the supporting staff insights into the understanding of the research participants in relation to their skills and actions. I am convinced that with proper training and guidance, the research participants and the peer mediators are able to understand each other's roles and apply the skills for conflict resolution into their daily encounter in a respectful environment.

### **To Provide Opportunity for Leadership Development**

Wynn noted her learning positively for herself and her friends. She noted more holistic learning points in linking the skills she has learned throughout the study. Her effort in learning and trying has gained her positive remarks on her leadership skills.

*Listen to my friends said, know your friends better. I try to observed, how I feel, what I do, learn how to do peer mediation slip (script), learn to write daily (diary), learn how to solve the problem, & try to write they (their) problem in paper.* (IT/PM/C3)

Her notion was supported by support staff U and P when they saw Wynn as the most mature staff in handling the situation in the centre.

*U: Wynn very good, know how to listen to others and give proper help to the members.* (IT/SS/C3)

*P: Sometimes I still remind her about her role as leader, she is good in guiding her friends...* (IT/SS/C3)

Joe too acknowledged the opportunity of using peer mediation as a platform to share his feelings for his personal development. He noted the benefits of peer mediation in helping him to improve his relationship with the others where he could identify the importance of developing his listening skill. His realization of some peer mediation skills has helped him to make a breakthrough in his personal resistance towards understanding of others as essential leadership skill.

*Peer mediation has helped me to become a bit more friendly, help me to listen people's feeling a bit better...* (IT/PM/C2)

*... sharing it with other people verbally is a better option rather than keeping it silence and this peer mediation process is one good way la...* (IT/R/J/C3)

Support staff N noted his relationship with the other members in Centre U has improved. He tried to relate to other members he seldom talked to.

*N: Dia cuba cakap dengan yang lain, dulu I tak nampak...sekarang macam dia ada cuba cuba sikit...*

*(He tried to talk to the rest, last time I didn't see... now he tried a little bit...)* (IT/SS/C3)

Maelyn noted peer mediation helped her to listen to others in relating to others. Her realization has yet to be evident in her action and relationship with others as noted by support staff P.

*Peer mediation helped me to listen so that I will listen properly what people say.* (IT/PM/C2)

*P: Susah tengok Maelyn bergaul dengan Centre U member. Dia cuba datang bergaul dengan mereka, tapi sekejap saja... tapi I rasa kena kasi dia banyak peluang lagi, mesti dia boleh...*

*(Hard to see Maelyn mixed with members in Centre U. She tried to come down and mix with them but only for a while... but I feel we need to give her more chances, I think she can...)* (IT/SS/C3)

The process of leadership development took its position throughout the study as their experiential learning with support from me as their facilitator. During the conduct of *U&Me* games, they learned to deliver the instructions as they have

prepared. This has established their facilitation skills. I supported them to ensure the suitability of the setting, reinforced on their instructions and provided the conclusion of the games to ensure a better understanding among the research participants. On the other hand, PM in action added evidence of their facilitation skills on top of the skills such as speaking and listening. Peer mediators were able to facilitate the conflicts to achieve its resolution. The confidence displayed by the peer mediators has provided good ground for them in supporting their peers in need for leadership development.

*They have learned many skills since PM training started. The intention of getting them to conduct U&Me training in Cycle 2 was to build up their leadership skill. Though they needed support here and there, like how to manage the setting of training, but I feel it's ok, as long as they willing to listen and learn from their mistake.*  
(D/PR/C2)

Moreover, their participation in making visual scripts has granted them the feeling of ownership in what they were capable of doing besides understanding and feeling empathy for the needs of their friends. The realization of their responsibility as peer mediators echoed the ability to make their rights 'real' through peer mediation. This has been encouraging for me as one of the findings in this study by witnessing the role of self-advocacy being expanded in the right-based approach. As they learn to take up the responsibility as a peer mediator, the support and encouragement from me as the facilitator become evident and meaningful in their leadership development.

*I was impressed by the answer provided by Joe about his learning to be responsible as a peer mediator. Maelyn's answers about the rights to talk, listen and help her friends have shown her knowledge on self-advocacy. She has also learned well from the training. I hope peer mediation will help them to really grow, help their friends in need and they can become future leaders.*  
(D/PR/C3)

As they made the effort in applying the skills they have learned, they became more responsible in their undertakings. Joe noted peer mediation has impacted him to be more responsible as a person in terms of helping the disputants with their problems. Wynn brought up that peer mediation helped her to know her rights in relation to self-advocacy. This was echoed by Maelyn to know her right to talk and to listen as a peer mediator in helping the disputants with their resolution.

*J: ... and also responsibility... guide them and help them to solve their problem*

*W: Know our rights...*

*M: Right to talk and right to listen...right to give suggestion to them...*

(IT/PM/C2)

Knowing and practicing their rights and responsibility as a peer mediator are noted as one of the key elements for leadership development. As they learn and practice their rights and responsibility, leadership skill was developed beyond their personal life in giving the support to their friends in need and impacting their lives to be a responsible citizen too. Through the abilities of peer mediators, leadership development became evident. As the peer mediators understood their roles and took the responsibilities, they learned to be leaders amongst the young adults with learning disabilities. Essential skills as peer mediators were transferred into leadership skills especially in leading and guiding their peers. These skills are related to the model of self-advocacy and peer mediation underpinning the conceptual framework of this study. The notions of their abilities to facilitate, show empathy, cooperate with one another, observe the setting, be reflective and able to analyse are taken as skills for leadership development. The point is leadership development is a process of transformation for them to achieve quality of life and to impact others.

## **To Improve Quality of Life from the Quality of Support**

The emphasis of peer mediation is on the process of a conflict being resolved. The findings showed that peer mediation has enhanced the research participants' lives from how their experience of conflict to achieve conflict resolution. The finding on the effect on their quality of life is closely interwoven with the findings from research questions 1 and 2 where the ability of the research participants and the peer mediators was acted on and applied in the real setting with the quality of support provided as a learning process. This includes the opportunities in relating their feelings with one another with the importance of friendship identified. All of us want a happier life, so do the young adults with learning disabilities where fun is identified as the key finding.

**Relating about feelings.** The notion of speaking up includes the rights given to them to relate their feelings which have provided evidence to improve the quality of life of young adults with learning disabilities. Peer mediation has impacted the lives of young adults with learning disabilities when they were able to relate their feelings over their problems. This then improve the quality of their life where RP#27 learned to stay calm after peer mediation. RP#28 experienced his problem being solved which had made him feel happy. It was a good reminder for RP#31 to be good to others after having the opportunity to talk about feelings during peer mediation. These learning points expressed by the research participants have highlighted the effect of conflict resolution in improving the quality of life. This also implied the increase in the quality of support from their peers during peer mediation when the disputants are being listened to.

*RP#27: ... how to stay calm.*

(VI/PM/MY/C3)

*RP#28: They tried to help me how I feel with my friend... and tell me what to do about our problem...they helped me with my problem... make me happy*

*feel ok, and better, for how, for what we did, for our problems... to solve the problem ok.* (VI/PM/R/C3)

*RP#31: Make friends... Talking about feelings...My life, my heart, I told myself not to hurt people... I want to be a good girl.* (VI/PM/MA/C3)

During the interview with the research participants, we managed to get them to share and identify their feelings before and after peer mediation. This notion has affirmed the learning points from *U+Me* training about their emotions, and given evidence to the roles of self-advocacy in expressing their feelings as an effect on their personal development. Most of the interviewed research participants identified and experienced a change of feeling from negative to positive feelings except RP#26 (Table 4.8). RP#26 could not identify her feelings before peer mediation as she did not think she was at any fault but felt relieved after peer mediation. The notion of the positive changes of feelings again has provided evidence on the roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation to improve their quality of life from quality of support.

Table 4.8

*Interviewed Research Participants on the Feelings Before and After Peer Mediation*

RP#	Feelings – Before	Feelings – After
RP#17	<i>Sad &amp; angry</i>	<i>Happy</i>
RP#24	<i>Sad</i>	<i>Happy</i>
RP#26	<i>Nothing</i>	<i>Relieved</i>
RP#27	<i>Nervous, scared, angry</i>	<i>Happy</i>
RP#28	<i>Panic, impatient, confused</i>	<i>Better, apologized, ok</i>
RP#29	<i>Not happy</i>	<i>Happy</i>
RP#31	<i>Hurt</i>	<i>Happy</i>

The platform of being heard has provided the disputants a good platform to share their problems and listen to each other in relating their feelings. Hence, quality of support was provided through peer mediation. This quality includes listening skills and people-helping skills of peer mediators as their abilities. Hence, it enhanced the

personal development of young adults with learning disabilities as a progressive growth in their quality of life from the quality of support available.

**The importance of friendship.** During the interview with research participants from Centre U, RP#24 and RP#26 were able to express the effect of conflict resolution in relation to their personal life. RP#24 understood her own problem and the need to respect her friends after peer mediation. RP#26 emphasized the importance of friendship in her life. These notions implied the quality of life yearned by the young adults in living with dignity.

*RP#24: I respect my friends... not to disturb them anymore... I will try.*  
(VI/PM/SM/C3)

*RP#26: Yes...because if we turn into enemy, no one to be friend with.*  
(VI/PM/S/C3)

Wynn noted the need for more friends from the research participants.

*W: They want more friends.* (IT/PM/R/C3)

This effect of conflict resolution was supported by the observation of support staff after the peer mediation. Disputants showed signs of relief and were able to resume work. Support staff U commented on her observation as the benefits of peer mediation to be friends again after each conflict.

*I saw RP#17 was very relieved after he came down from peer mediation*  
(ON/SS/C2)

*RP#29 was able to continue her work after peer mediation.* (ON/PR/C2)

*U: Itu RP#26, siapa jumpa...RP#27 ahh? Bila turun bawah, dia orang dah happy dah, dah boleh kawan balik...itu yang I suka...*

*(The RP#26, they saw... RP#27 right? When she came down, she already happy and can friend together...that's what I like...)*

...Dia orang tak ada perasaan benci la, tak suka la, biar dia datang kerja, mesti baik-baik, masalah dah solve, jadi kawan semula, kalau kita tak buat ini, sampai bila-bila pun, mesti tak senang hati la...

*(... they don't have feeling of hatred, don't like others... when come to work, must be good, problem solved, become friends again, if we don't do this, until forever, no peace...)* (IT/U/SS/C2)

Moreover, the effect of peer mediation extended beyond the personal to work when they learned to respect their friends. It has given a platform for the research participants to speak up about their issues or conflict even though it might not solve their conflicts per se. It is good to note that peer mediation has created an important avenue for them to have someone listen to them as a means to respect each other. When conflicts were resolved, the relationship among the members improved in terms of better friendship with positive feelings among others at work.

*M: maybe the question err mengatasi masalah (solve problem) maybe a bit difficult maybe peer mediator is not to mengatasi masalah (solve problem) they all. Maybe I say more on platform where the members the members themself are given a platform to ah... to realise that there is a conflict, a space for them to voice up, to voice up la you know that their dissatisfaction and stuff, and they get to see err some ah err kind of ah... a place la to talk about the conflict la I think that is important whether it will help them to mengatasi masalah (solve problem) or not during the peer mediation, I'm not sure la. At least they realise you know the conflict they themselves want to help to solve it. I think it helps them la you know that they oh there is a conflict oh maybe there are someone listens to them... instead of them keeping it to themself.* (IT/U/SS/C3)

Friendship among the research participants and peer mediators seemed to be important in their life. The notion of respecting each other was highlighted as their needs in achieving conflict resolution. The reduction of conflicts in Centre U has been noted with the notion of respect among the actors of the study.

*The members worked very well with each other nowadays. They are happy to come to work.* (ON/SS/P/C3)

*Analysing the data about peer mediation conducted, it has reduced from Cycle 2 to Cycle 3. I could sense the research participants in Centre U become more aware of their action and behaviour during work. Each of them became more focus at work. During lunch break, the atmosphere was cheerful and happy.* (D/PR/C3)

Respect is reciprocal and comes with action and reaction from one another. Young adults with learning disabilities acknowledged 'respect my friends' as the effect of conflict resolution. Respect has been cultivated as a value within the young adults. Disputants have experienced positive effect after their conflict was resolved. This was witnessed by the peer mediators during peer mediation and support staff after peer mediation. The notion of respecting their friends and being heard was highlighted the key findings for improving their quality of life from the quality of support. Seeing the research participants lived happily each day was important for each other in the setting as they learn to accept one another.

**Wanting a happier and fun life.** In relation to quality of life, the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation was noted as they spoke up about wanting a happier and fun life. For instance, in Centre U, as the research participants progressed to understand the role of peer mediators, it has opened up avenue for them to speak up, share their problem, and subsequently they would have more friends besides wanting a happier life. The visual-aided answers in Table 4.9 and Table 4.10 showed the life they wanted. In Centre U, most of them related their learning experience as in learning to talk to their friends in Cycle 1. This implied the importance of relational friendship. It is followed by respecting their friends as the most chosen answer in Cycle 2. Some realized that peer mediation helped them to solve their problem. This implied the perception of research participants, in yearning for respect from one another. In Centre D, they learned to talk to their friends, respect their friends and understand their friends better in their understanding of the effect of conflict resolution. Even though they did not experience peer mediation, it was noted they wanted a happy life besides learning to talk to their friends, respecting their friends and understanding their friends better.

Table 4.9

*The Effect on Personal Development*

Personal Development	Cycle 1 (Centre U)	Cycle 2 (Centre U)	Cycle 3 (Centre D)
I am happier	9	14	6
I can share my problem	10	10	4
I have more friends	8	12	3
I am more confident	5	4	1
I feel good about myself	5	8	4
I learned about my feelings	NA	2	3

Table 4.10

*The Effect of Conflict Resolution Skills*

Conflict Resolution Skills	Cycle 1 (Centre U)	Cycle 2 (Centre U)	Cycle 3 (Centre D)
I quarrel less with my friends	2	6	0
I learn how to talk to my friends	11	7	5
I respect my friends	9	10	5
I understand my friends better	6	8	5
I forgive my friend	7	7	3
My problem is solved	NA	6	4

The findings from the interview of research participants echoed a happier life as the impact on their personal development and relationship with one another. Maelyn and Wynn have understood the research participants' needs as they understood about the purpose of peer mediation in relation to their personal lives. By understanding the needs of their peers, peer mediators were able to provide appropriate support to help them.

*M: They are happier because they can share their problem instead of keeping it in their heart. Since their problem is solved, they have more friends.*

(IT/PM/C3)

Support staff noted the relationship among the members in Centre U has improved in term of their emotion and the manner they talk to each other in a more respectful way.

*P: They can talk about their feelings now...they know their friends not in good mood, they keep quiet and no disturb them...sometimes, when we play games together, they always enjoy the fun together... (IT/SS/C3)*

I noted the learning from U+Me training in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 has shown improvement in terms of their participation. As the research participants and peer mediators learned and enjoyed the activities together, they responded to the questions accordingly. This gave assurance for me to note about their perspective in life too.

*In Cycle 1, research participants were quieter. I think they still trying to understand the rationale for the training. In Cycle 2, we tried the same games. I saw their participation was more natural. I could see they enjoyed the fun together while learning. (ON/PR/C2)*

The findings have provided evidence in the roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation which is noted to have enhanced the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. The notion of the young adults with learning disabilities' ability to relate about their feelings, acknowledging the importance of friendship and wanting a happier and fun life has improved their quality of life with the quality of support provided concurrently. Figure 4.5 shall sum up the roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation based on research question 3.

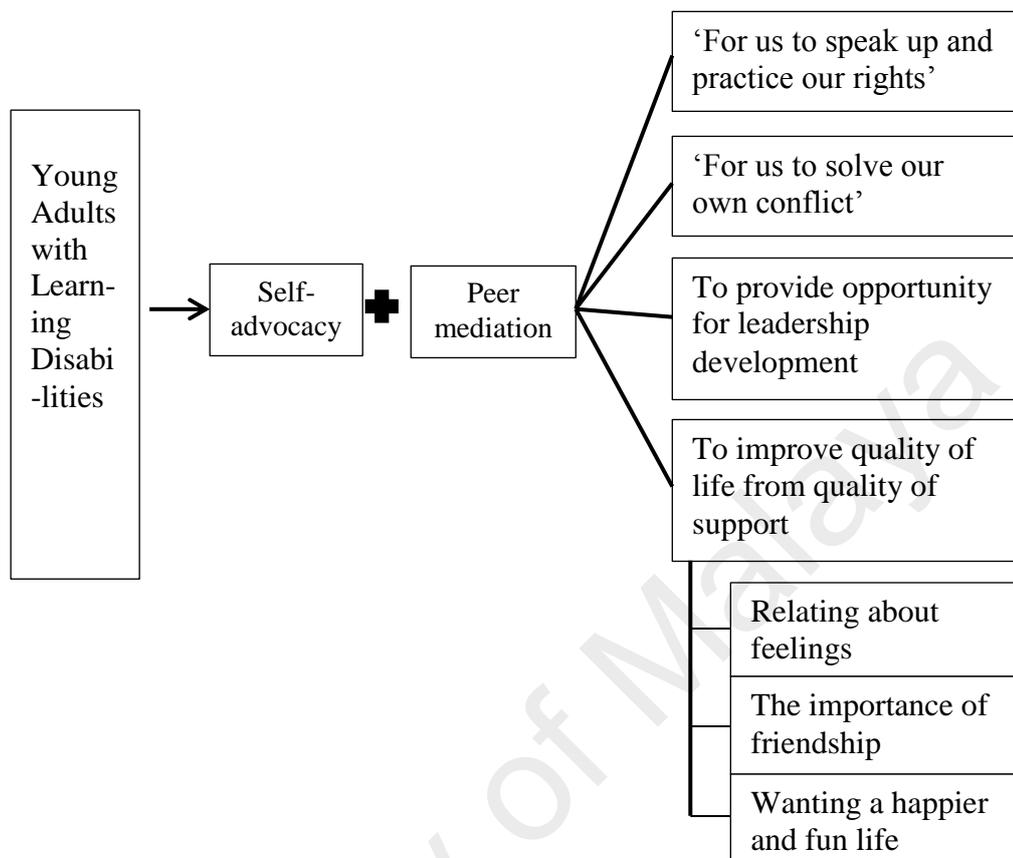


Figure 4.5. Summary chart on the findings of the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation

Peer mediation is acknowledged as a new model of activity which added value to the lives of young adults with learning disabilities underpinning self-advocacy in this study. The three cycles of activities have provided great insights for me and the setting of the study to understand the lived experiences of young adults with learning disabilities as research participants, peer mediators and research partners. They are always open to new learning opportunities. The use of self-advocacy in peer mediation has shown how the research participants understand the role of peer mediators and put it into good practice. Moreover, it has also showcased the ability of peer mediators to resolve conflicts among their peers and for the support staff to understand the synergy of power and control in providing appropriate

support. It was a progressive learning evolved from their sense of self towards the application of skills for conflict resolution. As skills are applied, support was needed and acknowledged to strengthen the support system. This has established a good role model among young adults with learning disabilities.

Amidst the challenges faced by the peer mediators, findings have enhanced our understanding about the needs and potential of the young adults with learning disabilities when opportunity was granted for them to take charge in achieving the roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation. The roles of self-advocacy have provided sufficient evidence in its implication for practice when young adults with learning disabilities speak up, practice their rights and able to solve their own conflict. The leadership skill is well-presented whilst their quality of life is being enhanced with equilibrium of support provided. The point is clear, young adults with learning disabilities have experienced the innovative and transforming potential of the roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation. Figure 4.6 depicted a summary chart of the findings for research question 1 to research question 3 in this study.

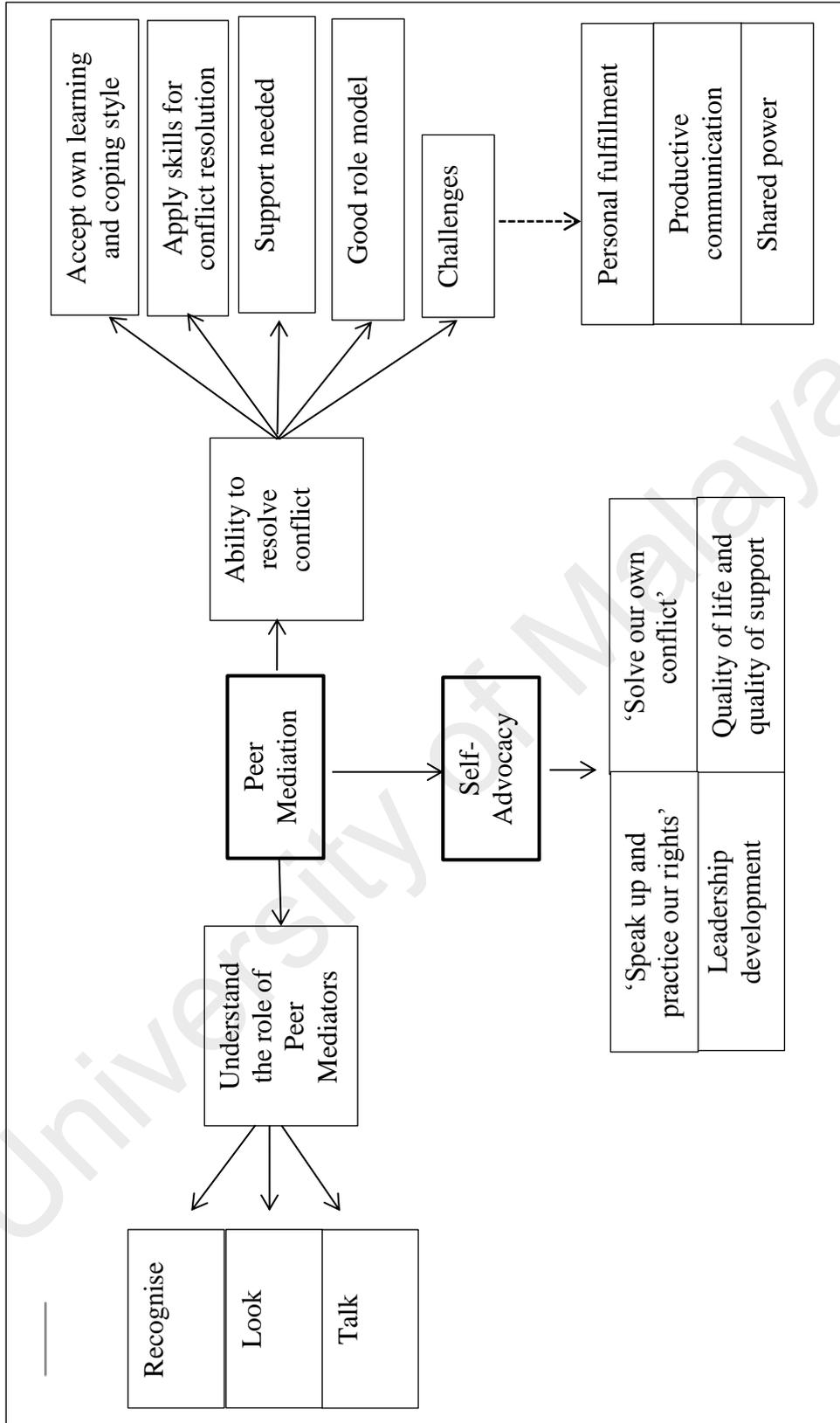


Figure 4.6. Summary chart of the findings for research question 1 to research question 3

## **The Role of Self-advocacy for Research Partners**

The role of self-advocacy has made its stance through participatory action research taken by 2 peer mediators as research partners in this study. Their participation has given weight to their abilities even though it was our first learning experience as practitioner researcher and research partners. The findings from the participatory action research have contributed to the role of self-advocacy in its application beyond the initial research questions to the fourth additional research question. Findings of the research process are triangulated based on my observation notes, reflections recorded in our diaries and the interview transcription and diaries of the research partners during the research process to affirm the role of self-advocacy. It is essential to note that the comparison among the research partners was not intended to 'minimise' the ability of the research partners, but to provide more evidence for learning disability study to be more critical and practical for the enhancement of research initiatives as part of the process of transformation in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities.

All three peer mediators were included in learning to be research partners in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 as their initial learning. Upon explanation and agreement, Joe did not join the learning in Cycle 3 due to his personal resistance and the need to take time off for self-development. Wynn and Maelyn progressed to take on the role of research partners with much encouragement and explanation of their new roles and expectation.

*I explained to the peer mediators about the overview of action research during our planning meeting. I wanted to gauge how much they can go with the additional role to be a researcher. I saw they are overwhelmed with the additional role. I decided to keep it at low pace so that they can focus on the peer mediation skill.*  
(D/PR/C1)

*Joe always made his initiative to volunteer to lead the team. It was hard to say 'no' to him as I wanted to give him chance to learn and improve. I needed*

*to guide him along as in controlling his impulsive behaviour to want to project himself as 'good'. I find it will be hard for him and the research team to carry on with his behaviour to be adjusted to.* (D/PR/C2)

*I encouraged Wynn and Maelyn to be more confidence in their thoughts and action to take on the research partners' roles. Research partners sounded more comforting for Wynn as she always feels safe when she knows there is support from me. Maelyn was excited to learn more skills. I hope they are able to transfer all the skills they have learned in peer mediation to apply in research.* (D/PR/C2)

The whole research process has added great insights for me as the main researcher, particularly in the area of the development of self-advocacy skills for research development. The role of self-advocacy has opened up more opportunities for the research partners to explore their research skills through the activities in this study progressively from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3. Subsequently, the relationship between the main researcher and the research partners was strengthened when the dynamic of power and control was being built in the research process. It is towards the ideology of enabling the research partners as they make the effort in learning this new skill. This enhanced the collaborative learning process for this participatory research initiative.

### **The Role of Self-Advocacy Skills as An Enabling Process for Research Partners**

The process of participatory action research has started since the beginning of the study when **PM** training took its position in Cycle 1 in an implicit manner. Essential skills for participatory action research were developed concurrently. This included the self-advocacy skills such as speaking up and listening to each other's feelings through peer mediation. For instance, during **PM** in action, peer mediators were able to speak up and listen to the conflict which happened. Through this experience, it built up their interviewing skills subsequently. During interviews with

the research participants, research partners applied the same skills with the research participants where reciprocal and productive communication was achieved. Throughout the research skill development, it is observed as a progressive learning underpinning self-advocacy skills as an enabling process. This includes planning, speaking up and listening, observing, writing, reflecting and transcribing evolved from the practical use of self-advocacy to peer mediation to the development of research skill. A summary chart of the enabling process is depicted in Figure 4.7.

**Plan.** The preparation and planning of interview questions has helped the research partners to understand the research objectives and research questions of the study. I prepared them for conducting interviews by asking them to write their own interview questions based on the research questions and interview questions I have used in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. After explanation, they came up with their easy-to-understand version (Appendix N3). Through their active participation in peer mediation review and planning meeting from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 and Cycle 3, they have learned to foresee the next cause of action to be taken with proper planning.

*In Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, I learned how to say my opinion about the peer mediation... I happy because got pictures to let the members understand...*  
(IT/W/C3)

The planning process has enhanced the understanding of the research partners about the purpose of data collection. During the interview at Cycle 3, on top of Wynn's ability to relate to the research participants in a natural manner, she explained well the research context to the research participants whilst gaining their answers for data collection. Planning has helped her to anticipate her next cause of action with much confidence.

*Wynn was natural as she is to talk to the interviewee. She was able to explain to the interviewee about the purpose of interview. She helped the interviewee to understand about peer mediation. She prompted the interviewee accordingly.*  
(ON/PM/C3)

*I believe peer mediation has developed their interview skills for data collection. There was not much preparation for them to conduct the interview with the research participants and supporting staff. They followed the prepared questions and asked accordingly. Wynn was more confident in relating to the interviewees.* (D/PR/C3)

As the research partners understood their role in planning, their understanding about the research context was enhanced. This enabled them to carry out their responsibility as research partners.

**Speak up and listen.** The ability of peer mediators in conducting peer mediation has built up their interview skill for data collection. This involved speaking up and listening as they related to the research participants. As they were able to speak up, Maelyn became more aware of her need for more support from me in relating to the research participants during interview. Due to her rigidity, she shared her struggle in listening to their speech. As she spoke up, she realized her need to be more relaxed and flexible during the interview. Maelyn tried her best to conduct the interview with some prompts and support from me.

*Maelyn needed more support in relating to the interviewee. She needed to improve her listening skills, especially in knowing what the members talked about. I helped her to clarify what the members talked. She carried on with the interview based on the script.* (ON/PM/I/C3)

*Maelyn could not be flexible in adjusting the questions. I needed to prompt her to re-ask the questions. Overall, I believe both of them have learned to conduct interview for this study.* (D/PR/C3)

The development of speaking up and listening inter-relates to transcribing during the research process. As the research skills are being learned and developed, Maelyn related her need to be patient when doing transcription as she needed to rewind the audio record and listen accordingly. She has learned to understand her role as research partner as a process in building her sense of self after much encouragement from me.

*I feel a bit impatient & angry doing N transcribe because need to rewind. I learn to listen what N said & to be more patient. I observed that I confuse N. I need to improve my speech and hearing skill. (D/M/C3)*

*I tried to talk to her and encourage her to try and be more patient about what she was doing during transcribing... I feel by understanding the interviewee, it would be helpful for her to listen to what they said. (D/PR/C3)*

In terms of speaking and listening to the research participants, Wynn did not have much problem with it. Her ability to speak up has helped her to receive support from her support staff.

*I can understand what they said...that's why I used the visual cards when I interviewed RP#17. He need that. Sometimes I can't get what they said, I ask you... (IT/W/C3)*

*I saw Wynn was more opened, when she couldn't get what the interviewee said, she would voice up for support. (D/PR/C3)*

Speaking up and listening are inter-linked with interviewing, data collection and transcribing skills as research skills being learned and practiced by the peer mediators in progress to be research partners. These skills were complemented by observation, analysing and reflection through diary writing in peer mediation as another set of research skill for data collection and data analysis.

**Observe.** Observation skill is essential for a researcher to note down what they observed as the evidence in writing. The observation notes taken during **U4Me** training in Cycle 1 (Table 4.4) were one of the preparation skills for developing research skills. Based on my observation and analysis from the observation notes taken by the research partners, Wynn was able to observe the setting with a more critical sense as compared to Maelyn who just noted down the incidents. Wynn's observation skill was complemented with her reflective and analysis skill as her ability. Joe's observation skill was influenced by his pre-assumption over the ability of research participants and during training with the peer mediators. I needed to constantly guide him to look at another perspective while

making his observation and comments. Hence, each of the research partners progressed at their pace in developing their research skills. They included their observation notes in the diary through all the trainings and activities.

*Wynn shared her observation with a more critical view based on her relationship with the research participants. Maelyn and Joe only wrote down the process, they couldn't understand the underlying reasons for the behaviour exhibited by RP#17 & RP#30 during U&Me training. Their gave negative view about the ability of the research participants.*

(D/PR/C3)

Maelyn has shown her emerging level in learning about observing and analyzing the research participants for her research skills development. She needed more time to make a better observation on the behaviour and action of the research participants.

*Do RP#29 transcribe... During the interview, I very focus asking question. I didn't observe how she answer the question. Now I watch again & transcribe the video, I found that she can answer by looking the picture. She can read simple word. I feel surprised that she can answer the question. (D/M/C3)*

Observation skill was progressively being developed in the research partners' action of learning about research. Subsequently, it helped in their writing and reflective skills.

**Write/Draw.** Diary writing was another skill learned by the peer mediators during the study in preparation for research. It was a real challenge for three of them in the beginning of their writing practice. Choice of drawing was given to them but none took up this suggestion. Hence, they were asked to 'just write' as the starter with a guideline provided (Appendix J1 and J2). They tried to follow the guideline in the beginning, but as they developed the writing skill, they preferred to write in their style. I had to constantly remind them to write and keep it as a discipline. Joe found it challenging to keep writing as a discipline even though he seemed to have the highest academic qualification among them. Maelyn's rigidness

was visible in her writing as described earlier. She was organized and neat in her presentation based on the writing guideline. Hence, one-to-one sessions were provided to support and encourage them to write accordingly as a discipline. During review meetings, we reflected on their writing based on their diaries and observation notes. Their writing skills have progressed overtime.

*J: How shall we write? Write only related to peer mediation or everything?*

*PR: You may write anything about you and your life, just write...anything that comes to your mind...*  
(IT/PM/C1)

*I spent individual time with Joe to 'force' him to sit down and write his personal encounter. He needed individual attention in making it through. I supported Wynn in helping her to make good analysis and reflection about her writing. She showed good effort in learning. Maelyn did not share any struggle in her writing. She noted everything about her life in her diary.*

(D/PR/C3)

Throughout the study, Wynn has exhibited writing as her challenge in learning due to her language deficiency as compared to Joe and Maelyn. However, her effort has provided evidence of her willingness to learn for research. She needed much encouragement from me to polish her writing skill and to be confident to write freely about what she thinks. The acceptance of her wrong spelling and grammar gave her the assurance of her capability in her free writing style where she was able to express her thoughts on paper. In fact, it was not difficult for me to read her writings based on my knowledge and experience about her genuine manner in learning.

**Reflect.**

Concerning writing, they were guided to be reflective in their writing. It was another challenging skill for them to grasp and apply. Reflective skill was developed through our review meeting from Cycle 1. As we took time to review the progress and plan for the next cycle, research partners learned to be reflective by providing their personal insights towards the peer mediation experience. Joe could self-question about his situation whilst Wynn was able to

reflect on her writing after much prompts and guidance. Maelyn found it challenging to reflect as she could not think beyond in the first two cycles. At the end of PM training in Cycle 3, everyone was asked to write what they had learned in a Thought Card at the end of the day. I was impressed to note the elements of reflective thinking with observation analysis. For instance, Wynn learned about cooperation, Maelyn learned to listen to others and Joe learned to be careful in his words and actions. They progressed to be more aware of their action and behaviour in relation to their peers as peer mediators. These were the elements of reflective thinking. Wynn, Maelyn and Joe were happy to be able to know and meet new friends. Moreover, Wynn was given the opportunity to conduct games during PM training in Cycle 3. Wynn and Maelyn also did peer mediation demonstrations. Joe was asked to sharpen his observation skill during the training. Sometimes, he needed to be guarded in his reaction towards others' responses.

*W: I learn to teach Centre C#PM2 about PM. I learn to cooperate with them, Centre C & Centre D... I learn cooperate each other. I learn how to control when is Peer Mediate. I learn ask Dong, King & Centre C#PM2 bcouz (because) they new friend.*  
(ON/PM/C3)

*M: Know new friends from other SA group. Learn to memorise in the food salad games. I feel happy to met them... I learn to cooperate with them in Peer Mediation. I learn to observe when they were arranging the card... Learn to listen to each other. Learn to talk with each other. Learn what to ask when a disputant don't want to agree.*  
(ON/PM/C3)

*J: 1. Learn about new friends.  
2. Learn how to handle PM much better.  
3. Learn to be careful with words.  
4. Was amazed at some of the answers given.  
5. Feel happy to meet new friends.  
One thing I need to learn is to observe more better. One thing I want to try to be more quiet.*  
(ON/PM/C3)

It was challenging for the research partners to be reflective in their learning process. Sometimes, I noted their ignorance in linking the points of learning to be

applied into their own context. However, it is neither an impossible task for them to learn in a collaborative manner where I had the opportunity to share my personal experience with them when we take the opportunity to learn together.

*M: It was hard to think more and more...because I do not understand what JC wanted from me...she kept asking me many questions, but I cannot answer her...* (D/M/C3)

*It was hard when I saw M like wanted to give up. I asked her to write down what was in her mind when she cannot answer my questions. I asked her to write down her emotions that she has learned in the beginning of the research project. What she has learned from peer mediation. She kept giving me the same answers, but I expected her to give me her real answers from her heart.* (D/PM/C3)

The role of self-advocacy has helped the research partners to speak up concerning their struggles. Hence, by listening to them, I understand their difficulties in learning to be reflective to their learning environment.

*M told me she can't think anymore. I noted M struggled, and I decided to give her a break.* (D/PM/C3)

The struggle to be reflective as a research partner has provided me insights in the area of providing necessary support to the research partners. As their learning pace was different, knowing their real needs is critical where both parties were expected to be open to each other's needs and development.

**Transcribe.** Wynn shared her worries over the new skill she learned such as transcribing which led to analysing. She learned the skill at her pace. She has displayed her matureness in handling these research skills especially in analyzing the research participants' needs during video analysis. She paced herself well in her learning process.

*RP#17 need prompt and picture. Something he can remember something he forgot. He can speak what he did during PM. I feel great RP#17 can understand only he need more focus when I interview him.* (D/W/C3)

*RP#31 look like not understand what Maelyn read. I feel worry she not understand what is PM she try her best to answer.* (D/W/C3)

*When I do transcribe I feel worried. I not used to it. Sometimes I listening not so good, a bit worried. I slowly learned from Maelyn and JC, listen carefully, repeat again, and work together with partner. At least we can help each other*  
(D/W/C3)

She tried to comply with the requirement as requested by me as the researcher. For example, she tried hard to transcribe the video. But when asked about the learning process, she was not able to explain about her struggles and challenges. I observed her frustration during transcribing and data analysis. She was given time to reflect on her learning process and note down in her diary. She needed more prompting in making analysis about the data and made her personal reflection. Her learning style and progress were different from Wynn, of which I do not have any intention to compare.

*I asked Maelyn about what she learned through doing transcription. She struggled to answer me. I prompted her with her reaction when she did the transcription. She made some noise during the task. Later, she acknowledged her impatience in needing to rewind the record because she could not hear properly.*  
(D/PR/C3)

*I wondered whether they are ready to be included as research partners. Wynn expressed her eagerness in learning to do research. I think she is more ready as compared to Maelyn.*  
(D/PR/C3)

The outcome of the role of self-advocacy and peer mediation skills has provided a good foundation in developing and enhancing their research development skills as an enabling process. However, the process of their learning and being is more important when they are able to make an impact in their personal development as they relate to others in the setting for research. My intention was on their personal development towards a holistic well-being. Observing them learning and progressing has been rewarding for me especially in seeing the potential of my research partners in conducting research amidst the challenges faced. It was an eye-opening experience for me whilst being aware of their area for improvement for research skills. It has

also added value to the evidence of leadership development in these research partners when their self-advocacy skills are being applied in an impactful and transformative manner as an enabling process.

### **The Dynamic of Power and Control in the Enabling Process with Research Partners**

The role of self-advocacy in peer mediation for research development entailed the dynamic of power and control in the enabling process with the research partners in this study. I concluded the component of enabling process as understanding and support with the research partners. This means when there was understanding and support, the research partners were enabled in carrying out their roles and responsibilities being our first experience in this endeavour. This implies the source of enabling skills come from the environmental factor. In this study, the enabling process covers the role of the support staff and I as the facilitating researcher in executing our role and quality of support. For instance, as I saw their potential in writing and was aware of their need to be discipline in writing, I needed to constantly remind them to keep on writing. At some point, I needed to point out to them about what to write in alignment to the research objectives.

*W: I don't know what to write...*

*PR: Just continue writing about what you see, remember the 4 points I have given to you in Cycle 1? But, at this stage now, I would expect you write more about how you feel and what have you learned... (IT/PM/C3)*

As much as they were eager to learn about research, their readiness in learning the new skill affected their learning capacity. On the other hand, as much as I wanted them to be enabled as research partners, I needed to be sensitive to their readiness and capacity too. For instance, I found out that Maelyn was overwhelmed with the research skills she needed to take on as she could not understand the

rationale of being a research partner in the beginning. I learned to let her go on her pace and gave her time to reflect about the new role.

*Maelyn could not answer my questions when I asked her about what she has learned through her diary writing. I noted she just followed what I asked her to do, but did not think through the purpose of what she was doing. I asked her to go back and think through and write down what she has learned...*

(D/PR/C3)

I found it challenging to note the progress of my research partners in developing their research skills from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3 as it was my first experience involving them in research. There was more intentional effort and action to make by including the research partners in the process as my initiative. Sometimes, due to their work commitment, it was hard to get them settled and to think further about research. Real practice makes real learning in forming its impact through time and effort. Though I was ambivalent in the beginning, but their effort in learning through practice has proven their ability and potential.

Wynn has shown her empathy and understanding towards the research participants. She appreciated team work and support from me. She expressed her interest in wanting to develop more about participatory action research. She has learned to pace herself in learning this new skill.

*W: I want to learn more about this... participatory action research...*

(IT/PM/W/C3)

From her peer mediation learning to research skill development, I sensed a good learning attitude in Wynn. Even though she needed a lot of encouragement and reminders, she was willing to take it positively.

*Supporting her to think and write was in good progress. She was willing to listen to questions posted to her, which I hope to stir her mind in thinking, relevantly for the context she is in. Her genuine mind is her plus point in her relationship with others.*

(D/PR/C1)

*Her enthusiastic in learning peer mediation and research skills was noted. Even though sometimes she felt difficult and challenging, her positive*

*learning attitude has 'pushed' her to progress. She knows how to take one lesson at a time.*  
(D/PR/C3)

When the research partners were overwhelmed, I needed to take time to explain again the expectation between us. However, the eagerness in learning this new skill has provided me with the hope to see much potential and meaning in this collaborative learning. Hence, much effort and time was intentionally spent. As the practitioner researcher, I am convinced of their abilities, simply due to the level of support I was aware of and ready to provide the support since the commencement of the study. On the other hand, I am aware that the skills being shared and learned throughout the study are applicable in the research process especially to the identified peer mediators and later the research partners.

For me, it was a journey of shared learning in the dynamic of power and control despite its challenges. I needed to constantly remind myself about my position of support and their level of participation. With the knowledge of self-advocacy and peer mediation in the research partners, I believe it was timely to empower their lives with concrete *knowledge transformation* (Paris & Winn, 2014; Stern, et al., 2014) in the development of the self-advocacy movement. For me, it was a collaborative learning process in making the roles of self-advocacy more prominent and practical for the development of research skill. Transformation takes place in leadership development when they take on more responsibility in understanding their roles. Inevitably, this collaborative learning was noted with the dynamic of power and control towards empowering and enabling the young adults with learning disabilities as research partners.

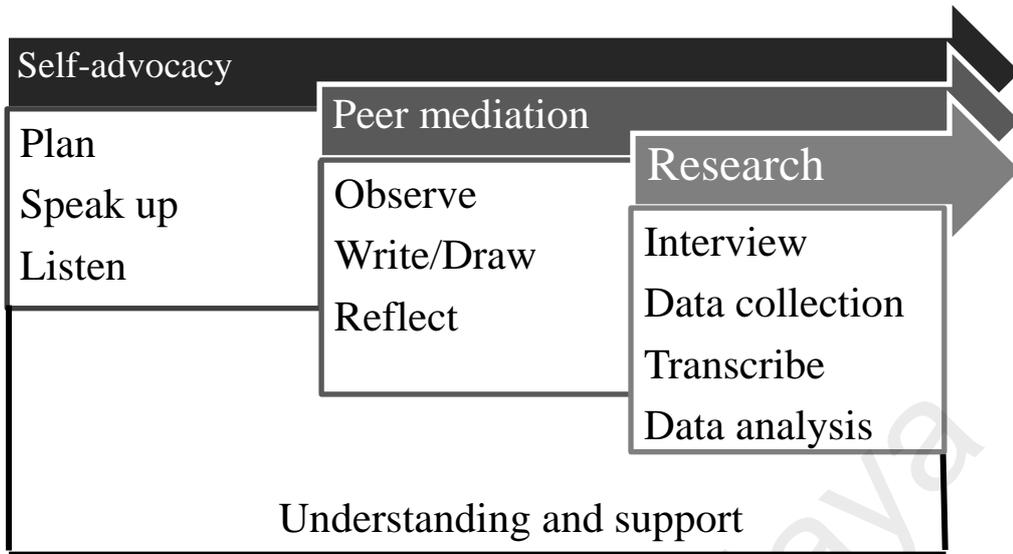


Figure 4.7. The enabling process

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## Summary

This chapter discusses the understanding and implication of peer mediation of all the actors of the study in achieving conflict resolution. The trainings throughout the 3 cycles have provided real experiential learning and actions of peer mediation which have enabled each actor to play his/her role with its meaning. In general, the understanding of the research participants evolved from the Envisioning Stage to Discovery Stage. Each of them has used his/her personal skills in speaking up to seeking help from the peer mediators for conflict resolution. Most of them have practiced self-advocacy skills at their capacity in their daily encounters which has highlighted the impact of self-advocacy especially in Centre U as a self-advocacy organisation. The support staff have provided appropriate advocacy support at their capacity, with the understanding of the role of self-advocacy too.

Peer mediators were showcased as the main actor in this study. Being recommended as peer mediators, though they did not fully understand the hidden rationale of the selection, they have demonstrated their abilities in learning the new skills and experimenting with the skills in supporting their peers, particularly in conflict resolution. Their willingness to learn has surpassed the implementation of peer mediation. In definite term, this recognition has granted them to build up their self-advocacy skills on top of their aspirations in their endeavour to enhance their competencies and leadership skills in the self-advocacy movement toward research paradigm. As they take on the responsibilities as peer mediators, the acknowledgement of their personal limitations and challenges has opened up the avenue in improving their sense of self underpinning self-advocacy skills. Continuous and collaborative learning have enhanced their will to improve their personal life whilst the acknowledgement of their challenges is seen as a form of

growth as they commit themselves to overcome it. Hence, the requirement of support becomes critical and essential in this life-long learning process.

In general, peer mediation was noted in the findings to have a positive impact in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities in this study. It has expounded the roles of self-advocacy skills in its implication for practice besides showcasing the abilities of young adults with learning disabilities. This relates to the emergence of participatory action research in the Participatory Stage as a step forward for them to expound the role of self-advocacy. I believe that the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation has made its way to highlight the possibilities of including young adults with learning disabilities in the research paradigm. Despite this development, challenges were acknowledged and outlined showing the difficulties in enhancing the services by and for young adults with learning disabilities. The next chapter presents the discussion of the findings in relation to the emerging themes and the related literature of this study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

The preceding four chapters of this dissertation provided background and the setting of the study, literature review for comparison, methodology and findings based on the research questions. This chapter attempts to recognise the consistencies and inconsistencies in their response whilst identifying connections, commonalities and gaps which are hoped to go beyond the existing literature to provide a critical interpretative insight based on the research questions. I believe that self-advocacy movement must be progressive in its empirical stance to fulfill the gaps between the theoretical and practical aspect (Armstrong, 2002). This includes the participatory research methodology used to fill the gaps besides expound the abilities of young adults with learning disabilities.

This final chapter has ten areas: summary of key findings of the study, discussion is written into the following three headings based on the research questions; on the effect of peer mediation in establishing a niche in peer mediation as a value prospect in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities, a process of transformation for the peer mediators, and the way forward for us to perceive sustainability towards social inclusion as a community of learners. The fifth heading discusses the limitations of the study followed by implication for practice with the discussion about the implications for theoretical advancement, practical development and research development. Discussion continues with suggestions from the study,

contribution of the study and future possibilities. This chapter ends with my concluding reflection.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Use of self-advocacy in peer mediation has provided great insights as a practice by young adults with learning disabilities in this study. The understanding of young adults with learning disabilities about peer mediation has proven their ability to learn and apply the knowledge gained in their own capacity and situation. The participation of the research participants in recognizing and understanding the role of peer mediators in the real setting is imperative for the self-advocacy movement.

The ability of the peer mediators to resolve conflicts starts from their ability to accept their own learning and coping style which informs their skills in resolving conflicts. Their ability to know and accept their own strength and limitation affect their self-image, which result their acknowledgement for support during their course of action. With the knowledge of needing each other in peer mediation, the peer mediators became confident in their endeavours in applying the skills learned for conflict resolution. Hence, it builds up their value of relationship with each other, among their peers and the support staff. Subsequently, they gained respect from their peers and became good role models. Challenges faced by the research participants and peer mediators are well-noted for their personal development and their spaces of learning differences. It starts from within and beyond the relationship with others which cover the challenges in the shared power within the support system in explicating the roles of self-advocacy. The ability of peer mediators affirms the self-advocacy movement in the implication for practice in a definite term. It is not about the ability of peer mediators per se, but the support system which inter-relates with the ability to move forward self-advocacy to a greater height.

The roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation became prominent when young adults with learning disabilities are able to speak up and practice their rights for conflict resolution. This seems to be easy for many, but it takes much effort from these young adults as disputants and also peer mediators. As they learn to take their life in a positive manner, as they are given the opportunity to express their feelings and experiences, the notion of respecting each other is being built in their life. Inevitably, they make their rights real in their life (Fyson & Cromby, 2013; Keyes & Brandon, 2012; Laurin-Bowie, 2014). This created a sense of achievement in them and mutual support among them when conflict was being resolved by their peers. Moreover, it creates another platform for leadership development among the young adults with learning disabilities. We want a happy life, so do young adults with learning disabilities. As they learn and practice about their rights, they become responsible for themselves and their own life. Certainly, quality of life would be enhanced. These inform the roles of self-advocacy in the most practical, experiential form by young adults with learning disabilities. In addition, these affirmed the interconnections of the theories and models underpinning the theoretical framework of the study in the dynamics of peer mediation in the promotion of social inclusion of young adults with learning disabilities in the community.

Data analysis using first level and pattern codes resulted in the identification of a number of key findings. These can be summarized as:

- The implementation of peer mediation has established a niche as a value prospect for young adults with learning disabilities to build up productive communication, value the meaning of 'play' and understand the needs of 'challenging' members.

- A process of transformation has been developed to achieve personal fulfilment of young adults with learning disabilities with qualities of leadership. The dynamic of power and control is noted during the process of transformation. Peer mediators learned to embrace challenges in the process of transformation for their personal growth and holistic well-being.
- The outcome of peer mediation and participatory action research has added knowledge to the support system in perceiving sustainability towards social inclusion.

The above summaries are discussed in the following session based on my experiential learning gained with the actors of my study within the meaning and importance of the findings of this study. Arguments and points are discussed to continue to query our understanding about the research topic in relation to the role and development of self-advocacy and the lives of young adults with learning disabilities.

## **Establishing a Niche: Peer Mediation as A Value Prospect**

I designed this study to understand how peer mediation is possibly practiced by young adult with learning disabilities to resolve their conflicts using self-advocacy. Findings from the study were identified for its emerging themes to form the prospective values in peer mediation. This includes value of productive communication, value to the 'challenging' members and value of 'play' based on research question 1. These values has established a niche and formed the setting for peer mediation in a more concrete manner.

### **Value of Productive Communication**

The findings from research question 1 have proven the importance of communication in resolving conflict. The varying communication styles have provided the young adults with learning disabilities the opportunity to learn and communicate in a natural manner. Peer mediation has seen the embrace of trust, respect, collaboration and communication in its application. In an effort to create an atmosphere in which young adults with learning disabilities could express their emotions during situations of conflicts, the peer mediators and the research participants worked to maintain a climate of trust, caring and respect. Through a safe and caring community, young adults with learning disabilities were free to express themselves knowing their expressions would be accepted, respected and supported. During the peer mediation process, they could recognise the ability of peer mediators to help them with their problem besides utilizing the platform to talk to each other. This is considered as a process of productive communication resulting in reciprocity of relationship based on mutual support, trust and respect in achieving restorative justice (Cremin, Sellman & McCluskey, 2012; Keyes & Brandon, 2012). This also fulfills their rights to speak as members of the community.

Their ability to relate and talk about their conflict and experiences of peer mediation produces productive communication. This involves equal capacity to hear from each other's perspective. This happened when research participants were able to affirm the role of peer mediator to talk to them. Subsequently, it builds the perspective-taking capacity in the parties involved through their conversation (McGuigan & Popp, 2007). From the onset, we noted perspective-taking capacity is empowerment to young adults with learning disabilities where they have begun to appreciate the presence of others amongst them. It is a concept of invisible power as they sat down to talk and communicate. Their thoughts and natural interaction has been utilized for productive communication which was empowering between and within them. The notion of the disputants being heard, feeling relieved and were able to be-friend among themselves has added value to productive communication based on the findings. According to McGuigan and Popp (2007), the process of productive communication not only focuses on the conflict encounter, it fulfills the transformative self of young adults with learning disabilities in their relationship with others. Hence, this should provide us the challenge to realign the restorative approach to maximize opportunities for synergy and growth.

Moreover, it is common to note the issues of communication faced by people with learning disabilities. From the typology of conflict in this study, conflicts happened when they are misunderstood by their peers and non-disabled friends. According to Chapman & Mitchell (2013), one of the issues in communication of people with learning disabilities which often caused mental health problem is the issue of mindfulness which is lacking in their personal and interpersonal lives. Larkin, et al., (2013) also highlighted the need for Social Information Processing model in guiding the individual intervention plan for individuals with intellectual disabilities

who exhibited aggression and offend. They concluded the importance of mindfulness and social processing on people with learning disabilities, which in this study, peer mediation would be the recommended approach in developing their sense of mindfulness within themselves and social cognitive skills with their peers. After peer mediation, it was noted that the participants became more mindful about their friends' presence and emotional needs with reduced conflicts happened among them.

In Hall's (2010) discussion about spaces of well-being for people with learning disabilities, he argued that the existence of exclusion and capabilities are possible in the lives of people with learning disabilities even though they are employed with material needs in an employment setting and prospect. My personal observation has proven the notion of exclusion at the work place on these young adults which resulted oppression in their lives (Caldwell, 2010). Often, many of them lost the opportunity to have productive communication which has affected the social emotional well-being of these young adults. Besides, many of the practitioners have overlooked the need to go beyond the personal context of communication. According to Kerr (2013), the issues of young adults with disabilities which are being misunderstood and mishandled at an individual level in most situations without any social network is oppressive and does not end up with positive outcome. Kerr then suggested by providing a 'safe' learning space with strong social networks to the young adults, it would increase well-being in their lives as post-conflict peace building efforts. In peer mediation, from the findings, it was noted that as they sat down and related to each other, a safe space has built up their social network in their personal lives with trust and respect.

Inevitably, from the findings, the value of productive communication in peer mediation fills the gap of this 'safe' social space. When young adults with learning

disabilities collaborated, communicated and supported each other, their understanding of each other and tolerance for diversity was extended. This fulfilled the need for love and belonging in the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954). It is a progressive personal development towards the highest hierarchy of self-actualisation based on the finding on the roles of self-advocacy in conflict resolution by improving their quality of life. Subsequently, young adults with learning disabilities live with respect to their friends when the opportunity to talk about their feelings is being utilized (Callus, 2013; Keyes & Brandon, 2012). Callus highlighted the importance for non-disabled people to value the perspective and life experience of these young adults with learning disabilities in viewing their lives with one another through productive communication.

Moreover, the value of productive communication during peer mediation has enhanced the ideology of interdependence in their effort to work for mutual agreement after conflict. Rusbult and Van Lange (2008) asserted the importance of interdependence as a sophisticated understanding of human behaviour over the processes of communication. They believed that the understanding and dynamic of trust is developed between the parties as person-by-situation interactions in employing Social Interdependence Theory. In the application of this study, this means the process of communication during peer mediation and after conflict resolution has provided the experience of trust between the disputants when trust and pro-relationship is built.

On the other hand, from the findings, I realized that for the peer mediators to understand and support the process of conflict resolution, their perception of rights and commitment to support the spaces of well-being of the disputants needs to be balanced as a basic premise of peer mediation. It is recognised as 'permissive right

associated with a neoliberal agenda of choice over protective rights' when it was beyond reality to conceptualise the inclusive notion of personhood in relation to universal human rights (Fyson & Cromby, 2013). This then uphold the inter-link between the Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory when the lives of young adults with learning disabilities are believed to be transformed in the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes as a progressive personal fulfillment through productive communication as an application of their personhood.

Hence, different communication styles are supplemented by difference strategies used in achieving productive communication. The argument lies in the reciprocity and cooperation from the involved young adults in playing their role in this experiential learning underpinning self-advocacy skills for productive communication. The ability of Wynn being able to communicate in a relational manner with the research participants was supported by the findings of her being recognised as their peer mediator. This means that the sense of belonging is reciprocal from both parties in the learning process. The explicit invitation to the young adults with learning disabilities is opened for their participation with a variety of support provided. The unwillingness of individuals was noted for other means of support where their action in a group setting was treated as their rights for participation in the social model (Kerr, 2013). The whole setting of using self-advocacy in peer mediation is paced with the intention of promoting social emotional well-being of young adults with learning disabilities as the focal point in the execution of productive communication in achieving conflict resolution through the application of human rights as their choice in personhood.

In building the value of communication, the findings of the study noted the challenges faced by the peer mediators in the early cycle. This includes the struggle

to listen and respond appropriate during peer mediation. This challenge was shared and support was given for them to put in their effort in understanding the research participants and their environment. At some point, the challenges faced relates to their personal perception in the relationship with others. This brought us back to reflect and rethink for different strategies in re-building the value of communication in different individuals they encountered. Moreover, the findings also noted the need for peer mediators to understand the context of conflict. This was noted as the experiential learning approach being applied in building up a community of trust based on a more environmental and person-centred approach (Fryxell, 2000). Another challenge faced was the dynamic and dilemma of team work among the peer mediators. It was an intentional planned effort in building up team spirit in peer mediation training. Struggles and frustrations were noted as a process of building up the value of communication among the peer mediators. From this instance, with support and understanding provided, the value of productive communication is built for the intention of transformation and sustainability underpinning Social Interdependence Theory in its application.

### **Value to ‘Challenging’ Members**

As discussed, peer mediation emphasizes on productive communication. In peer mediation, the manner of communication was used to explore the connections between thinking through choices, feelings and actions. This has added value to the self-advocacy skills in its application resulting in a major impact on members who are recognised as ‘challenging’. Even though the ‘challenging’ members remain challenging, but it was noted that they did not incur conflict with others as noted by the support staff. This challenges the meaning of ‘challenging’ members to be re-classified. Strongly queried by Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2013) on the label and

classification of learning disabilities, the civil society is challenged with a new way of thinking about disability, specifically learning disability. Though it is impossible for the civil society to avoid classification of types of learning disabilities, Goodley and Runswick-Cole critically suggested that we become subjective with critiques of ableism that disrupt traditional ideas about what is 'normal', to draw the link between 'us' and 'them' in revealing the relations of power during the act of service. For those research participants whom seemingly portrayed 'challenging' communication style during the study, an innovative approach was suggested and practiced to include them in the study. Their participation has challenged the mindset of the research partners, support staff and I to re-look into the meaning of inclusion in our own setting and understanding. For instance, we used visual-aided questionnaire and verbal repetitive prompts during peer mediation and data collection. From the list of research participants, we intentionally included our members who need intensive support in Centre U. This has granted us good ground when we share our knowledge with Centre D which also has diversified learning challenges amongst their members.

The finding from Chapman et al., (2011) research project has noted the common scenario where people with profound intellectual disabilities are being excluded from the local self-advocacy development. In this study, it was brought up as a concern to note the ability and practical level of peer mediators to handle the 'challenging' members where support staff might need to step in. This includes the lack of voice as one of the major challenges faced by the 'challenging' members. For the peer mediators, the findings showed that the most difficult step in resolving the conflict is talking about feelings, differing points of view involved in the conflict and knowing how to listen to the people involved. At this point, the 'challenging'

members might not be challenging, but the way they are being understood became the challenge.

Hence, this brought the critical need of a more interdependent form of support to engage in supporting this group of 'challenging' members, amidst the approach they are being understood by the peer mediators and the other stakeholders in making peer mediation a practice for all young adults with learning disabilities by rethinking what is human through disability (Goodley, 2014). From the findings, it was noted that peer mediators could not understand the behaviour and message of some members due to their personal past experience. To overcome this, the 'between-person' relation acted as a mean of interdependent when the peer mediators and the disputants sat down to resolve their conflict with the support staff in order to gain the understanding of trust (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Such notion has caused me to spend more time in explaining to the peer mediators about the members' needs and behaviour to minimise discrimination among the young adults with learning disabilities by challenging their knowledge about the 'challenging' members as we encountered. The role of interdependence has become practical to achieve the common goal by reducing gap to work towards the social inclusion agenda.

Argued by Mladenov (2016) from the social justice perspective, it is important for us to recognise the role of interdependency among us where the dependency of people with disabilities is acknowledged for consistent support. In this study, the concept and role of interdependence among young adults with learning disabilities was highlighted to the peer mediators to support the members in need underpinning relational understanding of personhood for a just society. The hesitation of the peer mediators in the beginning was well-supported with my encouragement for them to go beyond their comfort level of relating to the

‘challenging’ members. The application of the skills learned for conflict resolution was well-noted and balanced with the quality of support provided in their mutual learning path. When the need for support was acknowledged by the peer mediators, such development has enhanced their leadership skill whilst providing mutual support to their peers as a transformative learning process.

My argument is based on the importance of ‘relational understanding of personhood’ as described by Fyson and Cromby (2013) in their assertion for human right and choices of people with intellectual disabilities. Fyson and Cromby argued that this relational understanding towards people with severe intellectual disabilities should be used as fundamental basis for constructing services in making real the rights of people with intellectual disabilities. For example, during U&Me training, I found that some of the ‘challenging’ research participants were unconsciously excluded from the communication web due to some stereotyping among themselves and also from the support staff. The understanding of support staff in term of their ability to understand conflict and recognise the peer mediators was contradicted with the findings of their visual-aided answers especially the research participants with limited speech.

In this context, I needed to be attentive to ways of stimulating and facilitating the ‘challenging’ participants whilst encouraging the others to support those who are unintentionally being excluded. For the peer mediators who are expected to be the leaders, they were challenged to reflect critically on such situations about their roles and to seek for possible alternatives. For instance, Wynn has shown her confidence and calmness in relating to the ‘challenging’ research participants where she gained much respect from. Joe has learned to accept the limitation of the research participants whom he presumed as ‘hard’ to learn. The point is the concept of

‘relational understanding of personhood’ should be promoted to overcome stereotypes among themselves with intentional strategies and ongoing support from the support staff and other stakeholders.

Despite the advantage of implementing peer mediation as the extension to an existing initiative, the core issues of planning, skills development, the introduction of peer mediation tools and organising the entire prospect has recognised the needs of the ‘challenging’ members. The inference to be drawn here is that a model set of activities could be assembled for application in multiple contexts, irrespective of the cultural and organizational differences in the self-advocacy movement. Whenever the organization, planning for peer mediation services at its most specific level would always include consideration of questions such as the implication for these members who need ongoing intensive support (Warne, 2003). For instance, PM visual scripts were created to support members with communication challenges, repetitive instructions in trainings and follow-ups were provided to ensure their understanding and the visual interview questionnaire to include their voices.

Their voices may not be audible but just a raise of an eye brow, one or two words with a gesture or a laugh could create meaning (Brigg, Schuitema & Vorhaus, 2016). This does not mean their voice is not present. Neerinckx and Maes (2016) concluded that they could benefit from positive interactions provided the interaction partners are aware of the ability of people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities in different context. According to Brigg, Schuitema and Vorhaus, it is recognised as ‘relational commonality’ where relational space is created between people whose differences are many and profound. On the other hand, it is possible to observe, with confidence about their response to a learning situation as well as to

note whether a communicative opportunity has been missed or build for commonality as human beings.

In this study, we developed our own repertoire based on our understanding with which to inform our practice. Fulton and Richardson (2010) argued that advocacy service providers need to identify different, 'more culturally tailored' ways of describing services to them. Such challenge requires cultural knowledge development and practice through action and reflective practice to identify ways of meeting their intensive language needs. This was supplemented by the focus of personal explanation to the members who need intensive support to ensure they acquire much control over their decisions during peer mediation (Brigg, Schuitema & Vorhaus, 2016; Chapman et al., 2011). According to Chapman et al., the need for advocacy support is ongoing and varied in different individuals. In peer mediation, the responsibilities were being taken by the peer mediators as friends who can identify most of their challenges based on their past experiences in enhancing the opportunity for self-advocacy and advocacy support in the lives of all young adults with learning disabilities.

The implication is highlighted in the services by young adults with learning disabilities, specifically the 'challenging' members in enhancing their well-being. The argument posed by Gable (2014) challenges the practice in disability education to understand the real phenomenon from a critical realist lens. In the promotion of inclusive education and practices, in achieving social justice and equality, there must be a shift from 'disability epistemologies to disability ontologies and critical engagement with the explanatory power of models to local context'. To probe further in this argument, Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2013 and 2014) questioned our thinking to trouble the norm amidst the 'challenging' members in this study. The

point for us to seek and understand is in what way could humanity be shared simultaneously whilst embracing human diversity and difference. In our attempt to respond to the real-life experiences of young adults with learning disabilities in this study, though they might be ‘challenging’ at most times, when choices and control are granted, they progressed within their capacity in manner accepted by the other parties involved.

The self-advocacy movement has provided a platform to respond to the shift, in addition to peer mediation as a stepping stone for this systemic change in term of adding value to the ‘challenging’ members. The implication of peer mediation has provided sufficient evidence for theory-to-practice in the knowledge of real-world classrooms. Inevitably, the use of self-advocacy in peer mediation has opened up the opportunity to move out of the culture of expertise towards a situation where young adults with learning disabilities are given all the possible mechanism to participate and associate with the activities and practices (Kerr, 2013). This has added value to the experiential learning approach and reflective practice used in this study by the peer mediators. Moreover, it has provided significant insight into the mechanisms that provide meaningful responses to young adults with learning disabilities. Indeed, the value to the ‘challenging’ members has offered us the opportunity to acknowledge our existing skills and to discover ways which our own repertoire of knowledge and practice could be extended and enhanced in providing appropriate support to our friends in different form of need and support.

## **Value of ‘Play’**

The value of ‘play’ has provided avenue for me as the main researcher to re-think about its relevance to young adults with learning disabilities from the findings of ‘play with me’ as evidence. I have always believed that play is necessary to the physical, social and emotional development of our lives which includes young adults with learning disabilities. The oppressive lives of young adults with learning disabilities with the issues of discrimination, exclusion, aggression and bullying have deprived many choices and opportunities in their lives in my argument in the statement of problems in Chapter 1 (Caldwell, 2010; Flynn et al., 2010; Hall, 2010; Kerr, 2013; Monteleone & Forrester-Jone, 2017). According to the research report by Emerson and Hatton (2008), people with learning disabilities who live in private households were more likely to experience social deprivation than people in supported accommodation services; and people with mild/moderate learning disabilities were also more likely to experience social hardship as compared with those with profound learning disabilities. This set of issues continues in their adulthood, not surprisingly, in our own setting.

Based on my observation in the field and the findings of this study, social deprivation is typical in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities in the study specifically. In our argument about the needs of social emotional well-being of people with learning disabilities in times of austerity, often, the value of ‘play’ is hidden. Fun and play has been deprived in their lives as they grow, more so in the employment setting and their typical daily life. The notion of them living with their family in the private household too has limited their horizon of fun and play at most times except opportunity is provided to join other social functions and organisations in the community. From the self-advocacy perspective, the notion of social

deprivation has challenged the notion of their opportunity in speaking up and making choices which is believed to add value to the dynamic of their lives (Caldwell, 2010). The argument now is the depth of the impact and quality of their physical, social and emotional well-being in recognizing their voices based on their human rights underpinning the value of 'play' on top of the feeling of empowerment towards restorative justice.

Chapman and Mitchell (2013) noted the stressful lives and difficulties faced by people with learning disabilities conducted a study on mindfulness through mediation to people with learning disabilities in the UK. The study has given positive outcome and impact to the involved self-advocates when they were enabled to learn to control and manage their own behaviour rather than being directed by other people. The notion of self-advocacy being used in this research and study has provided sufficient evidence in listening to their needs for the betterment of their lives for personal transformation. Complemented by Anderson and Bigby (2017), the positive identities built through self-advocacy have provided clear evidence to improve confidence and quality of life. In definite term, Anderson and Bigby concluded that self-advocacy is a means of furthering social inclusion of people with intellectual disability. However, the value of 'play' is still hidden.

Back to this study, the establishment of employment centre focusing on work aptitude has become rigorous, hence, there was limited time for 'play' in the environment simply because work productivity is of utmost important. Argued by Goodley (2014), we are living in times of neoliberal-ableism as workers and consumers. It is hard for life to go beyond work in considering the social emotional well-being needs. Often, time of fun would be considered as other leisure activities occasionally as suggested by the self-advocates with the support from their families.

However, the implementation of this study with **U4Me** training for the research participants has provided new insights in the findings explicitly. From the findings, we noted about their ability to learn about self-advocacy and peer mediation during **U4Me** training. This has granted us the insights to enhance our learning strategies and quality of support to further empower their participation besides developing their emotional literacy for conflict resolution.

The intention of having ‘play’ as part of the approach to the training and environment has resulted in an increase of social and emotional skills in the involved young adults with learning disabilities including those who need intensive support (Warne, 2003). Nonetheless, learning through play strengthens the individual’s ability to cope with problems and the unexpected. This included the peer mediators as the facilitators during ‘play’. When allowed to be part of the daily activities, play can pose questions, negotiate solutions and cause collaboration among participants. Work goes easier when the setting is in a relaxed mode. Inevitably, it strengthens the relationship among young adults with learning disabilities as they identify with each other. Findings from both Centre U and Centre D are consistent and evident for us to note the learning strategies used. Moreover, these notions became evident in the peer mediation setting practically when the research participants took the initiative to look for peer mediators when they have conflicts with their peers. The achievement of conflict resolution has brought their life into happiness as the evidence of the findings. This challenges our thoughts specifically to re-consider the value of ‘play’ for the social emotional learning and needs of young adults with learning disabilities in times of austerity.

The critical point in this study is the value of ‘play’ reflected the true voices of young adults with learning disabilities in both centres as noted by the research

participants. According to Kerr (2013), recognizing and hearing the voice of individuals with learning disabilities is critical in re-framing the support services that reflect their true needs. In this case, the need of 'play' is being spoken out as their rights and needs. This value supports the safety and security in the hierarchy of needs based on the Theory of Human Motivation. Subsequently, it builds the implication to re-frame the support and collaboration as ways of being for the other actors of the study which is based on the relational construction to build on their sense of empowerment and belongingness. The value of 'play' included in the training in this study has provided opportunity for the involved young adults with learning disabilities to honestly and openly describe their experiences within their own social context with their peers. I believe such notion is a valuable insight in complementing the role and impact of self-advocacy in peer mediation as the effect on their personal development besides establishing a niche in their life experience when peer mediation is recognised as a value prospect for young adults with learning disabilities.

## **A Process of Transformation**

Resolving conflict requires skills including understanding the context of conflict, expression of feelings, attentive listening and flexibility to respond based on the model of peer mediation (Cremin, 2007; Sellman, 2009). These skills were learned and practiced regularly even though they could be abstract and challenging for young adults with learning disabilities, in this study, the peer mediators. The findings in research question 2 inform that the ability and learning process of the peer mediators. It is noted as a process of transformation in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities towards personal fulfillment and leadership development.

The opportunity of such learning and practice covers a variety of conflicts with the allowance for guidance through the resolution process underpinning the values of peer mediation. This enlightened the dynamic of power and control as part of the transformative process. The process of transformation evolved as they embraced the challenges faced by taking on more responsibilities in helping their peers and making an impact in each other's life. Ultimately, this process of transformation informs a better sense of self with a balanced holistic well-being development as young adults with learning disabilities take charge to live in the community with dignity and respect.

### **Towards Personal Fulfillment**

The findings in research question 2 projected that the process of transformation includes the willingness to learn and positive self-image in their endeavor as peer mediators. As part of the process of transformation, I found that each peer mediator has different perception and approach in conducting peer mediation based on their conflict coping style highlighted by Katz and Lawyer (1993) as the Dual Concerns Theory between goals and relationships. By learning

and acknowledging their own coping style, it has enhanced their knowledge of self, based on the model of self-advocacy (Test, et.al, 2005) and the model of conflict resolution strategies (Katz & Lawyer, 1993). By relating and complementing both models, it is empirical to note that their knowledge of self is being strengthened by their willingness to learn for self-improvement whilst overcoming their personal limitation as they re-considered their goals and relationship of human interaction towards personal fulfillment. The development of peer mediators underpinning their personal social emotional well-being has engaged increased consciousness in their conduct to improve their goals and relationships (Nan, 2011). Concluded by Nan, the study of conflict resolution is incomplete without the consideration of consciousness in conflict and conflict resolution. Hence, Nan argued that personal transformation and self-awareness is essential in conflict resolution underpinning the acts of consciousness. This relates with the knowledge of self which is intentionally being included in the peer mediation training.

From the findings, it was noted that each of the peer mediators differs in their knowledge of self based on their personal past experience (Singh & Ghai, 2009). Based on the manner of accepting their own learning and coping style, Wynn and Maelyn evolved in their personal fulfillment as a peer mediator as compared to Joe. According to McGuigan and Popp (2007), the process of mediation is constructive and developmental to all parties involved. It is a human development which emphasizes on our ongoing engagement with the world with the maintenance of our sense of self. Hence, the acceptance of Wynn and Maelyn is noted as developmental on their personal fulfillment. As we noted the peer mediators' will for self-improvement and overcoming their personal limitation during and after peer mediation, the process of personal transformation has taken place. McGuigan and

Popp further explained that transformational approach of mediation involves the effort in helping the disputants to know who they are and their capacity of perspective-taking. In this manner, the personal resistance of Joe has shown his limitation in his capacity of perspective-taking. The point is as peer mediators, young adults with learning disabilities have to establish or to an extent of re-establish their sense of self before taking the role to help and support their peers as a work in progress. The re-establishment of their sense of self means taking the steps to let go of their past. From the findings, Joe has shown such progress at the end of the study. This personal transformation has led to a greater freedom to act constructively and developmentally as a peer mediator on top of helping their peers.

Parmenter (2014) proposed the support services to emphasise on the development of the sense of self in young adults with learning disabilities as a means to attain quality of life. As I believe in their abilities with the differing senses of self, I trust their insights in building up the findings of the study as we progressed from self-advocacy to peer mediation. This includes the result of the peer mediators in their action of learning and developing their sense of self with trust and mutuality. Based on the model of self-advocacy (Test, et.al, 2005) and the self-advocacy movement in Malaysia, it is apparent to note that Wynn's knowledge of self is more evident as compared to Maelyn and Joe due to her years of involvement in the local self-advocacy movement. This has granted her the confidence to speak up, and to provide necessary support to her peers in peer mediation. The trust and respect she gained from her peers is well-noted by the support staff. On the other hand, the progress of Maelyn and Joe in term of their development of knowledge of self has provided opportunity for the support staff to note their need for more understanding

and support. Hence, more intentional support strategies were provided in building their sense of self towards personal fulfillment.

The learning process became challenging when Wynn and Maelyn took on the role of research partners. Much effort and time were taken into consideration for them to understand the process of conducting research besides achieving progressive personal fulfillment. Transformation of personal lives took place from self-doubt to self-determination underpinning Critical Theory to have more meaning and power to control their lives as they move forward by committing themselves as research partners (Kerr, 2013; McGuigan & Popp, 2007; O'Brien, 2005). As the self-advocates engaged their lives with more responsibilities in decision making through peer mediation and participatory action research with true sense of ownership and control on their own terms in the process of transformation, I believe a legitimate space of their sense of self would become a meaningful and powerful position in the self-advocacy development. Inevitably, the role of self-advocacy became prominent and critical as a fundamental skill for transformation.

### **Qualities of Leadership**

Findings on the qualities and abilities of the peer mediators and the effort in participating the research process have provided insights to project the young adults with learning disabilities' potential in their leadership skills. The implementation of peer mediation has highlighted a collaborative and collective approach to leadership with the elements of action-learning approach where the disputants and peer mediators learned to work as a team (Foster-Fisherman, Jimenez, Valenti & Kelley, 2007). Leadership skill is one of the components of qualities depicted in the model of self-advocacy and peer mediation. This includes the knowledge of group's rights, advocating for others, team dynamics and roles, knowledge of resources and

organizational participation in the model of self-advocacy (Test, et al., 2005). As discussed in Chapter 2, leadership development in the self-advocacy movement in Malaysia faces its challenges. Based on the findings in Chapter 4, this study has opened up the avenue for leadership development. Complemented by the model of self-advocacy and peer mediation, peer mediators have advanced their leadership skills in the value of facilitation, active listening, empathy, cooperation and empowerment (Cremin, 2007; Sellman, 2009). The point is through self-advocacy and peer mediation, leadership is developed in its natural and progressive manner.

The qualities of leadership are well-depicted in the findings of research question 2 where the peer mediators were actively applying the skills learned for conflict resolution. These qualities include being observant, flexible, confident, opened to express their feelings, understanding about each other and being aware of the need for different communication strategies. It is a progressive work where time and effort are essential in developing the leaders following the self-advocacy movement. From the findings of the study, it is well-noted that leadership skill does not happen overnight. Time and effort spent are the indicators of leadership to be progressed when their life is transformed with these qualities. For instance, the dichotomy from self-doubt to self-confidence, the versatility of different communication modes, the acceptance of own learning and conflict style and the acknowledgement of support needed are noted as the formation of leadership skill among the peer mediators from the findings of the study. Hence, peer mediation not only designed to smoothen conflict resolution, qualities of leadership has imparted into the lives of young adults as peer mediators.

One of the challenges in sustaining self-advocacy groups has been noted as lack of leadership skills amongst people with learning disabilities (Tilley, 2013). This

has been observed as a challenge in the self-advocacy movement in Malaysia (Maya, personal communication, 30 June 2016). Noted by Caldwell (2010), unless leadership positions are granted to the self-advocates to hold the leadership responsibility, it is hard to see them being developed as leaders. My argument is, in the self-advocacy movement, leadership is not a common belief for the professional and practitioners to uphold in their practice. The behaviourist approach of relating to young adults with learning disabilities has always be a stumbling block to illuminate the potential of leadership compounding by the quick-fix methods in dealing with their behaviour by the expert (Kerr, 2013). Ironically, in promoting the social inclusion agenda, it is typical for the professional to speak on behalf. Where is the voice of people with learning disabilities as leaders? Do we hear their voice in the social inclusion agenda as leaders?

The point is there must be a paradigm shift in giving the opportunity for young adults with learning disabilities to lead and guide others, in this study, through self-advocacy and peer mediation (Caldwell, 2010; Kerr, 2013). This means that as long as we do not hear from people with learning disabilities about their stance in the social inclusion agenda, we are not there yet. The gap is still there to achieve the social inclusion agenda without the agenda of self-advocacy (Parmenter, 2014). Hence, it becomes meaningless when we make the effort to advance ourselves to achieve the ideology of 'nothing about us without us' for our young adults with learning disabilities (Stranadova & Cumming, 2014). This strongly implicates the critical need to promote and practice self-advocacy with the development of leadership skills on people with learning disabilities being built for this cause underpinning a solid sense of self. The findings of this study have provided evidence for peer mediation becomes viable, to hear the voice of young adults with learning

disabilities by developing a solid sense of self with leadership skills to support their peers towards conflict resolution.

Moreover, the process of leadership development of the peer mediators became prominent with the significant roles of the broader environmental factors which include the families, key support persons and the community support system (Caldwell, 2010). In this study, peer mediation involves the inter-relationship among the peers as a process in developing a community support system. As leaders, peer mediators gained their respect as a good role model when young adults with learning disabilities valued the relationship with one another with genuine support in times of struggles and need. Subsequently, the involvement of helping others to speak up through peer mediation has enhanced the qualities of leadership in peer mediators. In turn, young adults with learning disabilities were able to seek for support in times of need. It has affirmed and embraced the notion of reciprocity and interdependency in their approach in the construction of leadership development (Caldwell, 2010; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008).

Along the same notion of building the next generation of leadership among the disability movement, Foster-Fishman, et al., (2007) suggested a more collective, integrated and action-learning approach of leadership development. This includes the presence of other stakeholders in playing their roles. Sullivan, Williams and Jeffares (2012) termed it as leadership for collaboration. Tilley (2013) highlighted the role of interdependency in sustaining leadership in the self-advocacy movement. For instance, the role of the support staff in this study, including me as the facilitator, has highlighted the importance of relationship and interdependency in building confidence in their abilities and leadership roles. From the findings, the notion of acknowledging the support needed from the peer mediators to the support staff and I

have built the interdependency in the setting of the progressive learning for leadership development. Even though the intentional decreased level of support has been planned and practiced, the formulation of positive interdependency became evident with a higher quality of relationship (refer Figure 2.2). This has re-instated the functionality of the model of self-advocacy and Social Interdependence Theory when peer mediation is positioned to achieve an effective interactional outcome underpinning the qualities of leadership in young adults with learning disabilities as the focus group. Inevitably, as we take the effort to re-look at the need for leadership development for young adults with learning disabilities, peer mediation for conflict resolution has filled the gap in its implication for practice.

On the hindsight, as qualities of leadership being established practically, Caldwell (2010) asserted the setting to achieve independence with its meaning. This means young adults with learning disabilities need to evolve from the family support to community support with confidence to form trusting relationship with other key person from the community underpinning the model of self-advocacy and Social Interdependence Theory. Such confidence should inform the qualities of leadership skill in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities towards interdependency. For instance, the notion of identifying their circle of support as part of the **PM** training sessions was intentional for the peer mediators to think and plan about the extension of the formation of their community support and leadership skill underpinning the model of self-advocacy. Leadership development is compatible to self-advocacy movement in explicating Social Interdependence Theory in its application. The findings of this study affirmed that leadership development should start from self-advocacy as the base, where young adults with learning disabilities are deliberately given the opportunity to participate in the decision making process

besides speaking up. The argument is it is about hearing their voices with understanding and support as a progressive development from the community.

On the other hand, in Caldwell (2010)'s study, the self-advocates acknowledged the need for advanced leadership development. This indicates a reciprocal development where young adults with learning disabilities become active in their learning. In this study, when the peer mediators gained their confidence, they showed their initiative to progress and indicated their commitment to build up their leadership skills. The point is when the essential skills of self-advocacy, communication depicted in the model of self-advocacy are established, leadership is built for its implication for practice when the initiative to help and support their peers made its way in. Hence, the need for constant support to build up their sense of confidence and assurance becomes natural as much as everyone's needs. Such dichotomy reviewed the connectedness of independency and interdependency as a multifaceted relationship in its application. This supports my assertion about leadership development through peer mediation and participatory action research underpinning self-advocacy and the role of interdependency as the mature base for transformation.

### **The Dynamic of Power and Control**

The dynamic of power and control happens simultaneously as a process of transformation where the support staff need to shift their perceptions in handling the power and control over the conflict during the course of providing advocacy support. The findings from the support staff noted their perception on the level of functionality and understanding of the research participants. Hence, the use of **PM** scripts and visual scripts serves as a framing device to support rules and procedures in achieving mutually agreed solutions to problems. This reproduction of the scripts

is designed to be sustainable in its application with a culture of peer mediation being promoted where the power and control by the support staff is to be decreased. The need for understanding conflict faded from the support staff as peer mediators gained confidence in their abilities to successfully determine what a conflict is and how to solve it. The confidence comes with the increased need for power and control by the peer mediators. The control on the process of peer mediation determines its outcome. When there is an intentional decreased of power and control of advocacy support, this added the confidence of the peer mediators to be 'in-charge' in the dynamic within the group. This is what self-advocacy means from the findings of this study, when people with learning disabilities to 'take control' and take charge. The argument is how much and how far should the support staff let them 'take control' or rather it is only an imaginary reality.

Power and control empowered the peer mediators within the learning environment or vice versa. From the findings in challenges faced by the peer mediators, it was noted that advocacy support can be challenging when the dynamic of power and control are not well understood for its application. Literature in Chapter 2 has indicated teacher's reduction of control as one of the challenges in peer mediation (Schmitz, 1994; Carter & Osler, 2000). Hence, Bickmore (2011) emphasized the importance of mindshifting in adult supervision to achieve successful peer mediation. Subsequently, Chapman (2013) in exploring the role of advocacy support through collaborative research concluded that 'acknowledging members' contributions alongside the work of their supporters helped nurture more collaborative relationship'. Chapman further emphasized the deep complexities within the support relationships as a reciprocal relationship between the dynamic of power and control.

In this study, as the main facilitator and researcher, I could identify with the dynamic of power and control. Even though there were times I took control of peer mediation sessions due to the limited skills of peer mediators as I perceived, there were times they appeared to want an authority in control as their rights (Fyson & Cromby, 2013; Tilley, 2013). When a peer mediator was perceived could not make a good choice, I reminded him/her about the choices he/she has. Sometimes, I made the choices for them. Each time I made a choice for them, I wondered about the developmental appropriateness of decision making in self-advocacy movement. It requires me to identify the necessity of reflexivity throughout the study together with the peer mediators as we review and reflect upon our actions. On the other hand, when the opportunity was given for them to make decision and take control, I noted the process of transformation taking its position in the peer mediators to embrace the meaning of self-advocacy and practice their rights.

Pointed out by Chapman et al., (2011), the lack of real choices in their lives leads to difficulties for people with learning disabilities to assert their right. In this study, we noted the deprivation of real choice when the management of Centre D decided that they were not ready for the application of peer mediation even though the implications of peer mediation on young adults with learning disabilities were explained. The dynamic of power and control was not balanced with the environment support. The research conducted by Fish (2016) again reminded us about the importance of nature and quality of relationship among the young adults with learning disabilities and their environment support. The controlled manner of the staff in managing the lives of women with learning disabilities on locked wards has deprived them of choices and quality of life. At some point during the study, the research partners and I saw the tension between their desire to have freedom of

power and control and their need for support from me. For me, there was a need for constant balance of power and control to achieve the equilibrium in making their rights real.

Affirmed by the recent research conducted by Williams and Porter (2017) on the meaning of 'choice and control' for people with intellectual disabilities, it is concluded that confidence in them could be built through peer support and joint decisions with trusted others. With my knowledge about their self-doubt and their ability to assert their right, I learned to build a community of shared power by listening to their choices and decisions. Concluded by Chapman (2013), in building collaborative relationship with young adults with learning disabilities, it takes time and effort in acknowledging and recognizing their contribution and effort. This extends the quality of our relationship in supporting constructive management of conflict based on the application of Critical Theory.

The acknowledgement of needing support from me and the support staff is noted as the dynamic of power and control being contested when I noted the genuine involvement of the involved young adults with learning disabilities in shaping their lives. Subsequently, the support given to them was appreciated with respect as the notion of shared power. Such collaboration has gone beyond the 'technical' support and added value to the advocacy support in a relational manner. In providing support during the course of action, I became transparent about the tasks they undertake, and paid particular attention on the scope of their roles and needs including the technical and caring support underpinning the ethics of rights (Klocker, 2012). Each of the peer mediators has different level of sense of self within themselves. For example, the technical support needed by Maelyn during peer mediation, the encouraging support for Wynn occasionally, and the caring support for Joe in his personal

development of his sense of self. According to Flecknoe (2005), the involvement of an adult is critical to maintain the sustainability of peer mediation. In this study, at most times, I needed to reflect on my personal sense of self whilst exploring their understandings in adding value to the collaboration we are committed to. As I strive to improve the quality of support as requested, it takes effort in balancing the dynamic of power and control consecutively towards enabling the peer mediators and the research partners to take control of their responsibilities. The ideology of 'relational understanding of personhood' as described by Fyson and Cromby (2013) was noted in balancing this dynamic of power and control.

The culture of peer mediation has been built in this study in Centre U with a critical mass of support provided by the support staff and the management. Self-advocacy and peer mediation need to be consistently uphold in the daily routines with appropriate understanding and support. For instance, ongoing reminders, follow-up training for members and peer mediators could be arranged to maintain peer mediators' skills. Support staff have been reminded about the type of support provided with the balance of power and control. From the findings, it is noted that insufficient understanding and support from the staff and management would not result into any positive impact in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities but only a controlled life (Carter & Osler, 2000; Fish, 2016). Both the peer mediators and I felt disappointed over the power and choice made by the management of Centre D in putting on hold peer mediation as one of their self-advocacy development agenda. Such a decision has challenged our existing mindset about the role of self-advocacy in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities.

According to Chapman, et al., (2011), it is common to note that people working in learning disability services may feel disempowered by the lack of

resources, entrenched regimes and lack of training. Hence, in relation to peer mediation in this study, it is a potential risk that staff and management would perceive such initiative as inappropriate. Consequently, it broadens the gap of self-advocacy with lack of understanding in its implication for advocacy support when power and control are not granted to young adults with learning disabilities in their encounter. This highlights the need for the understanding of the meaning of self-advocacy in relation to advocacy support based on the principles of power and control in peer mediation and approaches of behaviour management based on human rights approach in the setting (Flecknoe, 2005). The findings of the study have provided the evidence on the enabling process underpinning understanding and support as the base for self-advocacy development in advocacy support. The point is the need for advocacy support starts from the effort in understanding the meaning and application of self-advocacy in peer mediation. It is a belief about the ability and potential of young adults with learning disabilities which emerged from the process of transformation in this new model of activity. It is a dynamic which needs to be balanced in providing support and achieving independent advocacy in young adults with learning disabilities where transformation of life becomes critical and evident in its implication for practice.

### **Embracing Challenges for Personal Growth**

Transformation of life is a process with the aim and anticipation for positive outcome. Many researchers have reported the positive outcome but overlooked the process of learning and transformation. In a process of learning and transformation as one of the elements in the theoretical framework of this study, it is typical to note the struggles and challenges faced by the peer mediators in their learning progress towards personal transformation (Caldwell, 2010). The assumption is unless young

adults with learning disabilities go through their personal challenges, learn to embrace their personal limitation, transformation does not take place. From the findings, it was noted that peer mediators noted about their self-doubt, personal resistance and detachment as their challenges within their personal fulfillment. For instance, the notion of self-doubt was noted apparent in Wynn, Joe and Maelyn collectively as they take on the responsibility to be peer mediators. It was not until they were being encouraged to re-look and reflect upon their past experience which was believed to affect their personal self-image.

From the onset, these challenges have become stumbling blocks for them to construct their path to leadership development. Upon reflection, they acknowledged and accepted their personal challenges as a step of transformation. The fragmented core sense of self which has been overlooked in their growing years towards adulthood is exposed for transformation to take place (Parmenter, 2014). Compounded by the challenges in building productive communication and collaboration in shared power, inter-personal skills became more critical by acknowledging these challenges to achieve personal growth in a more specific manner. However, such challenges were noted for more intentional effort to build on their sense of self towards resilience as the key factor for leadership development in this study. It took constant support in building up their sense of self. The findings from Cycle 3 have challenged Wynn and Maelyn to understand and embrace their roles as peer mediators. This implicates the personal growth of young adults with learning disabilities does not depict in a linear form. It is through intentional support and space provided to grow in their capacity with understanding from the environment.

Building a collaborative relationship by acknowledging the peer mediators' contributions includes acknowledging their limitations and personal challenges. As we noted their oppressive past experiences with hope and aspiration for them to be resilient, it is vital for us to embrace their personal challenges in the process of transformation. It is noted that in past research on strategies to support self-advocates and the life experiences of people with learning disabilities, few talked about resistance of self-advocates and embracing the challenges of people with learning disabilities (Caldwell, 2010; Haigh, Lee, Shaw, Hawthorne, Chamberian, Newman, Clarke & Beail, 2013; Jingree & Finlay, 2013). According to Caldwell (2010), in the leadership development of self-advocates, it is noted that the disability oppression and resistance informed the approach to leadership development. Self-advocacy movement has provided them the safe space to speak up and overcome their oppression and resistance as a collective body for personal growth besides enhancing their leadership development. In this study, the peer mediation training has imparted such values with the intention to enhance the sense of self towards leadership development.

In Behrendt and Ben-Ai's (2012) study about the role of guilt and shame in an interpersonal conflict scenario, the emphasis on self-awareness has been considered as one of the basis in the styles of coping with conflict. Collisson (2014) identified naïve realism, egocentrism and cognitive-informational processing as the contribution to conflict misperception underpinning the sense of self. In peer mediation training, self-awareness has been the focus key area in developing peer mediators. Such topic included getting the peer mediators to know and understand their styles of coping. It was encouraging to note their progress after knowing their styles of coping evolving from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 for Wynn and Maelyn. On the

other hand, the intention of building up their writing as a discipline has provided much opportunity for them to re-look their inner sense of self. For instance, the resistance exhibited in the action of Joe was noted as his personal resistance. It was difficult for him to embrace his personal challenges after many individual review sessions. From the onset, his resistance has caused conflicts with other research participants. However, this became a learning experience for him to go through the role of guilt and shame as one of the factors for him to consider for his personal growth. The conflict happened between him and the other actors in the study were noted as the experiences of shame as lack of self-worth which led to non-cooperative coping of conflict with the evidence of low concern for others and high concern for self (Behrendt & Ben-Ai, 2012). It was encouraging to note his personal growth as an experience of self-liberating at the end of Cycle 3. The findings on the challenges of their personal fulfillment have provided space for the peer mediators to form their positive disability identity (Caldwell, 2010). Moreover, it has given insights for the support staff in re-thinking and re-developing our support to be more sensitive to the development of social emotional well-being of young adults with learning disabilities.

The notion of peer mediators having conflict with the support staff was noted as a new challenge in this study and was beyond my expectation. In the conceptual planning about peer mediation, I was planning for the peer mediators to resolve conflict among the research participants. The unexpected happened when conflicts happened between the peer mediators and support staff. Upon discussion, the conflicts were taken into consideration as we agreed to put on the equality lens, where all of us encounter conflicts and need mediation. Noted from Larkin, Jahoda and Pert (2012), they verified the likelihood of young adults with learning disabilities to encounter conflict with strangers or peers outside their friendship group. This

includes the issue and tension of 'taking over' and different perspective of thinking between a self-advocate and the support staff (Chapman & Tilley, 2013). When a conflict is resolved, the relationship between disputant with learning disabilities and without disabilities is valued for its worth. The findings in this study yielded the same outcome for both parties. Moreover, this process has added value in helping young adults with learning disabilities to make more effort in developing their social perspective thinking. Through peer mediation, it strengthens the collaborative understanding between the parties involved by embracing the interdependency approach to community support.

In this study, I noted the value of productive communication was challenged by the different communication needs among the involved young adults with learning disabilities as research participants. Such challenges were compounded by those young adults who are hesitant to seek for help even though they have sufficient speech and knowledge to seek for help. There was the element of the lack of understanding on the role of peer mediators or the undermining mindset on the ability of peer mediators as they did not realise the effect of peer mediation and the value of productive communication. This resulted in the need of more time and effort in explaining the role of peer mediators to them in Cycle 2. The same outcome after explanation implied the resistance of young adults with learning disabilities to grow.

As we noted the peer mediators' resistance, it applies to other peers in the hierarchy of needs for sense of security and control as depicted in the Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation. This challenges the type of advocacy support in dealing with the personal issues of each young adult with learning disabilities as the occasion arises in finding the most appropriate approach to establish their sense of security. The easy way out was to ignore the problem when conflict often happens in

a vicious cycle. The argument lies in whether such occasion is handled for the personal good or collective good. Hence, this highlights the importance of the perception and support from the support staff in their effort in motivating the whole setting to value the effect of productive communication through peer mediation whilst supporting young adults with learning disabilities for their personal as well as collective growth. It could be an intentional motive and action by the support staff in promoting self-advocacy for peer mediation and conflict resolution whilst looking into the personal and collective growth of young adults with learning disabilities for transformation to take place in achieving its effectiveness towards self-actualisation as individuals and a collective body.

Asserted by Chapman and Tilley (2013), providing ethical self-advocacy support is based on relational ethics and autonomy in the understanding of choice and control to overcome the challenges in collaboration of shared power. It is a facilitation of reciprocity between the involved parties to locate the role of self-advocacy in peer mediation in the process of transformation. Hence, it is critical to note the development of a coherent approach in managing self-advocacy and peer mediation is in demand. The practice of this coherent self-advocacy and peer mediation management should be an option of choice to sustain its impact in transforming the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. This implies the importance to understand the basics of self-advocacy by all stakeholders and how appropriate support should be delivered through its practice. Besides taking the account of the availability of our government services which may be regarded as complementary to an organization, the notion of responding to self-advocacy management shall consider the culture and mode of governance in the organization, more critically the belief of one's perception concerning self-advocacy in the life of

young adults with learning disabilities, in which complexity and the pace of change represent unprecedented challenges.

### **Perceiving Sustainability towards Social Inclusion**

By establishing peer mediation as a niche and a value prospect, it has provided evidence for personal transformation in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. Being a social practitioner for the past 18 years, the self-advocacy movement has seen social inclusion as an ideal goal from the theoretical perspective without much practical development. According to Fyson and Fox (2014), the pursuit of social inclusion is not new. The complexities of the multi-layered problems in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities have become the barriers to social inclusion. However, through self-advocacy, many personal stories of young adults with learning disabilities have been self-advocated in local and international meetings, seminars and conferences (Maya, personal communication, 30 June 2016). The argument is still controversial to the extent of its implication for practice and development in the role of self-advocacy.

Through this study, I hope to challenge us to re-think the meaning of social inclusion in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities underpinning the roles of self-advocacy as a mature base in view of its practical development. As peer mediation is classified as an innovative activity, the value of collaboration is re-emphasised in perceiving sustainability towards social inclusion based on the roles of self-advocacy from the findings in research question 3. The roles of self-advocacy were further expanded when peer mediators Wynn and Maelyn were empowered to be the research partners in Cycle 3. Hence, my research design on participatory action research is considered as a journey of transformation for Wynn and Maelyn specifically as research partners, notwithstanding the other actors of the study in their

participation and effort to deepen our understanding on the meaning of social inclusion in a progressive manner towards sustainability.

### **Self-Advocacy as A Mature Base**

In this study, peer mediation has become a new model of activity for resolving conflict by young adults with learning disabilities. It is noted as a radical change in its social relation underpinning self-advocacy as a mature base. The argument is how shall we view self-advocacy in its application particularly in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. Argument in Chapter 2 has brought us to look at self-advocacy in relation to the quality of life in young adults with learning disabilities. Findings in Chapter 4 showed how peer mediation has played a greater role in the process of personal transformation in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities in achieving their personal fulfillment respectively. Inevitably, the research participants' voices were heard when they spoke up and practiced their rights as disputants. More importantly, they were given a safe social space to relate their conflict and resolve their own conflict at their capacity in an understandable setting. Hence, the ability to speak up and resolve conflict has become constructive in its application when the role of self-advocacy is explicit and practical through peer mediation in advancing their quality of life.

However, when we examine our local self-advocacy development, cases of success are commonly being highlighted about the capability of these young adults in presenting their own stories (United Voice, 2014). The argument is, does self-advocacy only involve telling their stories based on the past research (Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006; Chapman, et al., 2011; Jingree & Finlay, 2011; Wehmeyer, Bersani & Gagne, 2000)? In definite term, the stories of the lives of individuals with learning disabilities have made an impact in the self-advocacy movement particularly for

individuals without disabilities to understand their background and experience. This could be one good avenue to work towards social inclusion. The point is, as the stories are told and being understood, it does not stop at the level of understanding and acceptance. We need to move on and re-think how we can make an impact in each other's lives by progressing on the role of self-advocacy in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities towards social inclusion. This means the role of self-advocacy is being expounded to impact others at a greater height. This highlights the point of whether we as the support community of people are willing to embrace the effect of self-advocacy working towards achieving the social inclusion agenda.

From the findings of this study, we have noted the ability and potential of these young adults with learning disabilities and how peer mediation has provided the avenue for them to speak up and practice their rights. Indeed, the participation of the research participants in speaking up about their understanding of peer mediation has magnified the role of self-advocacy. This has granted the peer mediators the affirmation to make the effort to build reciprocity for a more enhanced communication besides giving each other the opportunity to practice their rights (Callus, 2016). Hence, from the self-advocacy perspective, when it is time for young adults with learning disabilities to stand up and speak for one another as a concerted effort underpinning the role of self-advocacy, it is a step forward for them to take control of their lives. In this way, the self-advocacy movement can be expanded from 'my' story to 'our' stories in a natural community setting. Affirmed by the observation of the support staff, this setting has created a safe social space for young adults with learning disabilities to share their problem. Through this, we build a community with a stronger sense of self with the knowledge of group's rights too.

Beyond the personal story, the role of self-advocacy has been proven to be effective in removing barriers in the employment setting (Skelton & Moore, 1999). Most of use might agree that having a job by young adults with learning disabilities is important as they progress into adulthood. The argument is the implication of the role of self-advocacy as a mature base in other aspects of their lives besides employment. From the findings of the study, when the role of self-advocacy is being practiced by the research participants, they were able to seek help from the peer mediators when they encountered conflicts. Throughout the peer mediation process, their ability to seek for help, support each other and solve their own problem became evident. Subsequently, this has enhanced their quality of relationship through constructive management of conflict and shared power as depicted in the theoretical framework of this study. Such notion has provided much encouragement to the peer mediators in the same setting when they witnessed the functionality of peer mediation underpinning the role of self-advocacy to respect one another in a more holistic manner and quality of relationship.

Perceiving the life of a young adult with learning disabilities in a holistic manner and with quality of relationship, self-advocacy could play its role as a mature base beyond having a job. This means the role of self-advocacy needs to be deepened and explicated for its direct impact in their lives in other aspects such as having free choice on top of enhancing the social well-being development of each other. For instance, the expression of dissatisfaction by the self-advocates has opened up the avenue for young adults with learning disabilities to have the right to free choice as a principle over their own life (Jingree & Finlay, 2013). The point is to be able to make choices, it derives from a solid sense of self with appropriate support system. The evidence of peer mediation in this study has progressed on the right of free choice

where the knowledge of self and social emotional well-being of young adults with learning disabilities is addressed to be essential and critical for the other actors to take note of. Hence, this extends the development of a more holistic well-being in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities in perceiving sustainability in the self-advocacy movement underpinning the knowledge of self. Subsequently, stigma and barriers are reduced with more understanding and support in the support system in building up their lives with free choices and confidence.

Besides increasing awareness on their knowledge of self and personal development, peer mediation leads to a greater freedom to act constructively in conflict resolution towards peace building as a community with group identity (Wehmeyer, Bersani & Gagne, 2000). Constructive management of conflict is achieved by building quality of relationship among the young adults with learning disabilities through the expression of their personal needs towards understanding of each other's presence and needs in peer mediation. From the findings of the study, peer mediation has provided the opportunity to relate their feelings whilst identify the important of friendship. Hence, this has improved the quality of life in building up the reciprocity in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities (Callus, 2013). The role of self-advocacy is explicated for more functions in cultivating a positive environment. Moreover, when quality of support was provided by the peer mediators in guiding the disputants to reach their own solution, growth is noted in the lives of disputants. It is an ongoing process in building up the quality of life in each other's lives when the impact of peer mediation is being carried out. Thus, the findings of this study has provided sufficient evidence where self-advocacy has attained its roles as the mature base towards social inclusion of young adults with learning disabilities through peer mediation.

## **Peer Mediation as An Innovative Activity**

As discussed in Chapter 2, peer mediation is not a new initiative in the community setting such as schools and community in many regions in 1990s (Cremin, 2007; Guanci, 2002). Its effectiveness has been proven in different settings amidst its challenges towards the cultural setting like the schools in perceiving its sustainability (Bickmore, 2011; Flecknoe, 2005; Sellman, 2002). Limited research and practices of peer mediation for special needs population has provided opportunity and potential for young adults with learning disabilities to make it possible due to its challenges such as the learning differences of students with intellectual disabilities besides the school environment and readiness to practice peer mediation (Bodtker, 2001; Cremin, 2007; Warne, 2003).

In this study, peer mediation has provided the evidence as an innovative activity to note the implication of peer mediation in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities beyond the school system following the self-advocacy movement in the community setting. For instance, the ability to note the importance of friendship after peer mediation has cultivated respect among the peers. This innovation has provided the opportunity for young adults with learning disabilities to enhance their quality of relationship with each other besides solving their own problems and conflicts in a restorative approach towards restorative justice (Cremin, Sellman & McCluskey, 2012). Moreover, it was discussed by McVilly et. al, (2006) that friendship among individual with intellectual disabilities was an issue of concern without appropriate intentional support. This implicates the need for friendship is critical in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities as discussed in the setting of this study. The findings of this study clearly depicted the value of peer mediation when they learned to respect their friends and maintain a positive

relationship in their own setting. Indeed, the effect of conflict resolution through peer mediation has improved the quality of their life. This makes the role of self-advocacy prominent and transformative in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities.

As the only self-advocacy organization in Malaysia, peer mediation is being introduced and implemented as an innovative activity in expanding the self-advocacy movement in this study. At the point on the spectrum of preparedness, self-advocacy approach has had the advantage of the organisation for transformation of life to fill its gap. The ability of the research participants in learning and recognizing the peer mediators by understanding their roles accordingly and progressively has provided sufficient evidence to note personal transformation in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities as the effect of conflict resolution. This included the learning of emotional vocabulary in peer mediation training and **U4Me** training which has enhanced the cognitive perspective-taking and critical consciousness in conflict and conflict resolution of young adults with learning disabilities during peer mediation in its application (Lane-Garon, et al., 2012; Nan, 2011).

The application of peer mediation is learned as an innovative activity has seen its means in personal transformation as young adults with learning disabilities took the opportunity to relate themselves with the others as an act of consciousness and mindfulness (Chapman & Mitchell, 2013; Nan, 2011). The findings showed that after peer mediation, the research participants became happier and indicated their life has become happier. The role of self-advocacy becomes visible and viable when young adults with learning disabilities took the courage to go beyond their personal boundary in extending their relationship with others through peer mediation. This furthers the application of Social Interdependence Theory interwoven with Critical Theory in the aspects of productive communication for quality of relationship.

Supplemented by the abilities of the peer mediators and the research partners based on Kolb's experiential learning approach, peer mediation as an innovative activity has seen its impact in developing problem solving skills that traditional learning environment was not able to stimulate (Reilly, 2013). In Fourali's (2009) effort to use cognitive behaviour therapy as an effective approach to conflict resolution, peer mediation has made its way in. The argument is cognitive behaviour therapy could be effective in a personal context, peer mediation has complemented the personal needs towards the interpersonal and intrapersonal needs in a dynamic and progressive approach. As we debate and strive to achieve social inclusion as an agenda in the educational and community setting, the impact of the learning approach has provided an effective outcome when peer mediation is being used as a tool in this study.

Subsequently, real action learning was cultivated as active experimentation through peer mediation with the notion of speaking and listening. This is supported by the findings given by the research participants in relation to their lesson learned. The simple gestures and expression of wanting friendship and to be happy with one another is noted for action learning to be progressed. Support staff also provided evidence in noting the increased knowledge of their emotional vocabulary in the daily setting. For the peer mediators, the progress of experiential learning approach became effective when the peer mediators made their effort in learning and reflecting about their roles. For instance, learning became effective when they took the effort to improve their facilitation skills in *U&Me* training. Hence, I believe this practical learning approach was effective particularly to young adults with learning disabilities as an innovative activity not only to promote peace through peer mediation, but also has enhanced the quality of learning experience in the application of theories and

concepts of conflict resolution in the real world. This adds value for us to perceive sustainability in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities towards social inclusion in terms of the practical learning approach used.

### **Value of Collaboration**

Beyond the experiential learning approach used in this study, the value of collaboration complemented and enhanced the learning experience. It is recognised as a collaborative learning towards mutual support for social inclusion among the actors of the study (Keyes & Brandon, 2012; McClimens, 2008). The value of collaboration is discussed in two aspects in perceiving sustainability towards social inclusion: the collaboration among the young adults with learning disabilities and the peer mediators based on the model of self-advocacy and peer mediation, and between the young adults with learning disabilities and the support staff based on critical theory and social interdependence theory. According to Chapman (2013), the value of collaboration becomes apparent and meaningful when there is mutual understanding in the relationship with intentional time and effort spent by recognizing and acknowledging each other's effort.

The collaboration among the young adults with learning disabilities was visible when the skills for conflict resolution were applied during peer mediation in action. This happened when the disputants were able to speak up and look for peer mediators whilst the peer mediators were able to provide necessary support for the disputants to achieve their resolution in a constructive manner. The key to collaboration in the learning community is the power of young adults with learning disabilities' choice with shared power and shared control in the environment. As peer mediators, by leading rather than ruling, members gained the power necessary to sustain choice and control without coercion. The choice and control of young adults

with learning disabilities led to collaboration in the community as they made their thoughts known to each other through speaking clearly and developing their use of language in peer mediation.

According to Keyes and Brandon (2012), this informs the model of peer support among young adults with learning disabilities which resulted in a better quality of life when they learn to respect and support one another by speaking up. Subsequently, the notion of speaking up has nullified the typical public assumption of people with learning disabilities as 'passive dependents' (Chapman & Tilley, 2013). This implicates when choice and control are gained as shared power and being utilized by young adults with learning disabilities at their capacity, the oppressive regime of life is challenged for transformation (Kerr, 2013). The explicit involvement of young adults with learning disabilities in this study as disputants and peer mediators has added the value of collaboration in term of their rights to live as active citizens.

In this study, conflict has entered into a collaborative, cooperative learning group as social conflict which includes misunderstanding between the young adults at most cases (Larkin et al., 2012). It then affects the development of group dynamic in utilizing the process of conflict resolution as a cooperative learning. As the members have learned about feelings and emotions including skills on speaking and listening in *U+Me* training, practices make peer mediation more effective and experiential in the dynamic of cooperative learning underpinning a sense of belonging. Moreover, the sense of belonging was developed and visible after peer mediation. From the findings, research participants became more aware of the presense and temperament of others. They exhibited much understanding on their friends in need and enjoyed each other's presence in a deeper manner. Subsequently,

the roles of self-advocacy in peer mediation have provided positive accounts when their feelings and circumstances were heard with respect from their peers. Hence, quality of life becomes evident as they live with much fun and happiness with the sense of belonging as an individual and a community.

Reflecting on this current practice, the nuance of language is affirmed when peer mediation has become a valuable tool in highlighting their ability and potential with the relational autonomy from the support staff (Chapman & Tilley, 2013). In the pursuit of social change and the attainment of rights, Chapman and Tilley concluded about the importance of reciprocity in the relational autonomy between the peer mediators and the support staff with the value of collaboration as an ethic of care. The argument is about the autonomy level and the quality of support provided by the support staff during the practice. According to Chapman and Tilley, 'autonomy is something that occurs through and between relationships, whereby those with specific experiences and areas of expertise facilitate people to come to particular decisions on their terms, taking full account of their sense of self'. I as the facilitator and main researcher of this study believe such autonomy is significant in advocacy support.

Being transparent and open to share has been our committed understanding to create impact in our collaboration when I had the opportunity to openly share my struggles with the peer mediators during our review meetings (Chapman, 2013; Cook & Inglis, 2009). There was no protocol for us to oblige in our learning for development and change. Hence, it enhances the role of interdependence which frames self-advocacy in the relational nature of practice based on Critical Theory to achieve social justice and equality (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Moreover, such collaboration has given me the opportunity to experience their ways of thinking and

feeling as I shared my personal encounter and expectation over their commitment. The one-to-one session spent with the peer mediators was one of the strategies in building the quality of collaborative relationship where I was convinced of the importance of enabling the peer mediators towards enhancing their sense of self and transformation of their lives. Specifically, Wynn became more confident in her pursuit to enhance her leadership skills. Maelyn and Joe have learned to accept their personal limitation in view for their personal liberation in relation to understanding the needs of other research participants who found it challenging. This has helped them to rebuild their sense of self in a progressive manner though both differed in their learning capacity. As the main researcher, I appreciated their open sharing from their hearts which in turn has cultivated a stronger collaboration in terms of providing more understanding on top of appropriate support in witnessing their progress for personal transformation.

The experiential learning approach used in the trainings and support given to the peer mediators in the research process is the key in achieving the meaning of empowerment underpinning the value of collaboration as a form of transformation. Indeed, Caldwell (2010) noted the experience of oppression and resistance in the past experience of people with learning disabilities has formed a foundation for transformation to take its position through self-advocacy. Hence, the content of peer mediation training has been designed with such intention to overcome their experience of oppression as an innovative activity. Parmenter (2014) added the oppressive challenge faced by people with learning disabilities to cope with two different forces – from outside and from within as they strive to develop their sense of self for a better quality of life.

Acknowledging the peer mediators' vulnerability and the need for interdependence, I was aware of my role in promoting advocacy and self-determination as a mean of quality of support. For instance, in supporting Joe, his intense resistance was well understood by his oppressive experience in his past life. Hence, he needed more time and space to reflect and rebuild his sense of self from within. Such notion was well accepted by him after explanation. This affirms my assertion for peer mediation and participatory action research practically to meet the needs of young adults with learning disabilities in developing and sustaining a viable self in the social world where they would be able to construct and establish their own meaning in their own personal life in relation to the community. I believe it is always a work in progress within its support system.

In fact, engaging research partners in the research design entailed more labour and power in sharing the work load and responsibility for decisions (Klocker, 2012). Moreover, the learning differences of my research partners to become more empowered needed to be upheld in the application (Chapman, 2013). The notion of their different learning pace in terms of developing their research skills has entailed much explanation and encouragement in witnessing their progress. For instance, the self-doubt in Wynn and sense of detachment in Maelyn has caused them needing more time to learn and understand the skills. Hence, it is important to constantly acknowledge the value of collaboration amidst the challenges faced. The facilitation and coordination of assignment of tasks upon our discussion and agreement made the collaboration meaningful. On the other hand, the open sharing about their struggles with new tasks has provided the avenue for appropriate support. The dynamic and value of collaboration was enhanced in sustaining its practicality of support between the research partners and I, as the main researcher and facilitator of the study. In this

manner, we work closely and inclusively at all stages of the research process at their utmost capacity. This includes working with them to find ways of resolving various transformative dilemmas which often made me realise about their limitation and need for support at most times.

Even though they might present challenges of little knowledge and understanding of the research process and what collaboration entails, I made all the effort to ensure their participation as a means to attain the social inclusion agenda. I believe this value of collaboration is credible in the broader contexts of academia, social and political arenas with a multi-method approach to encourage their participation (Aldridge, 2014). As I noted the research partners' commitment and enthusiasm to keep learning, my effort in building up the collaborative relationship became more enlightening to enlarge my perception on the potential of this partnership in a sustaining manner. Asserted by Parmenter (2014), the point is for the collaboration to witness the young adults with learning disabilities grow in the process of transformation, to be an autonomous individual within an interdependent societal context with an opportunity to achieve his/her hopes and aspirations. In promoting social inclusion and quality of life of people with learning disabilities, it is a constant battle underpinning the value of collaboration with quality of support by perceiving sustainability in the practical life experience. With this, I believe the findings of this study have provided its evidence of achievement to an extent as a work in progress.

## **A Journey of Transformation**

The use of participatory action research with the intention to get ‘up close and personal’ with young adults with learning disabilities, in this study, the research partners, has provided sufficient evidence that they have a valuable role to play in making the research process meaningful as an enabling process in their journey of transformation.. The success of peer mediation in the context of this collaborative research, rest upon the inclusivity and connectivity of its human infrastructure with the call for considerable management talent in realizing and fulfilling each other’s roles and responsibilities (Aldridge, 2014; Chapman, 2013).

In this study, connectivity was intentional during its commencement when peer mediators were given the opportunity to reflect upon their past life in rebuilding their sense of self. Hence, drawing upon the life experiences of the involved young adults with learning disabilities, the peer mediators and the research partners in this study, their participation and productivity has validated the concept of active citizenship (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2014). Active citizenship in this study covered the notion of research partners being given the opportunity to take charge of the research process with increased choice and flexibility within the role of interdependence with the main researcher. In their demand for respect and in their strive to meet the expectations of active citizenship, their engagement in this participatory action research has challenged the norm but with much aspiration to take full charge of the research process prior to their inexperience in conducting research. Nevertheless, this is considered as part of their journey of transformation in revealing the explication of Critical Theory, Theory of Human Motivation and the Social Interdependence Theory in the theoretical framework of the study.

During the research design stage, in my assertion and goal to use participatory action research of investigation, education and action was to understand the social reality of young adults with learning disabilities and to facilitate an enabling research process with them. The planning did not guarantee that the 'action' would lead to social transformation on either the personal or collective level, or whether the other actors of the study would see the need for change. Moreover, as the main researcher and practitioner, my conviction is to make sense of the potential of young adults with learning disabilities in its response to disablism out of my personal intellectual curiosity (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2014). In definite term, the findings have granted a great insight for me in seeing and making sense the potential and hope of working with them as research partners as a journey of transformation. Another purpose of getting on this methodology was to understand the knowledge created by young adults with learning disabilities, and how these kinds of 'literacies' would allow for the possibility of reframing and transforming actions in the self-advocacy development. But, did they engage in 'research'? Did they formulate an explicit research problem and collectively design, conduct and measure (qualitatively) the research exploration? No, not exactly. So, what did we do?

At the beginning during peer mediation training, they produced knowledge about themselves: the writing, dictating, drawing, pasting and cutting became the tools of analysis and helped them investigate themselves and their worlds. The collection of information, analyzing and summarising done in peer mediation training helped them recognise that things they know about their world were valid and that others felt similarly. What happened next? They moved from discussing and informally 'researching' their own realities and experiences to reaching out collectively to other young adults with learning disabilities in U+Me training and

peer mediation. Small actions were taking place within the programme from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3. The feedback from the peer mediators and research partners who have participated in this study suggested that although it might be difficult to understand participatory action research techniques at first, it becomes easier with time, practice and opportunity. Their potential and ability was supported by techniques that enable them to breakthrough their existing comfort ability. Within themselves, these may not seem to be revolutionary activities that contribute to major social transformation, but, on the other hand, we did begin to challenge the oppression of silence and resistance, invisibility and isolation felt and experienced by most people with learning disabilities (Chapman & Mitchell, 2013). This included Wynn and Maelyn, the research partners I was working with. The learning process has added to our new knowledge. The point is the willingness to learn with upmost commitment as research partners has also yielded promise to this transformative learning process.

The journey of transformation contributes to an important lesson for me as the main researcher in this process is that it is imperative to remember that social and personal transformation is not an event but a process that takes time and effort over the three research cycles. According to Bigby and Frawley (2010), this involves developing a relationship in challenging their views and fostering reflection. We all operate on our very personal time lines and it is important not to examine the validity of our efforts towards emancipatory acts as the end results but rather as a process of struggle that should be celebrated at all points of the process. The process of learning involved acknowledging the challenges along the way with the differences of each other's ways of perceiving matters (Buettgen, Richardson, Beckham, Richardson, Ward & Riemer, 2012; Chapman, 2013). Even though relationships have been built in the beginning of the study, the challenges of detachment by Maelyn and self-doubt

in Wynn persisted in the research process. Moreover, both of them found it challenging to digest and apply what they are learning. This has slowed down the process of transformation in the individual until one overcomes it with open heart for this new learning.

Often, due to the overwhelmed learning, a research partner would choose the 'easier' option without much thinking and reflecting about the issue by answering 'I don't know' to questions which require their reflective practice (Aldridge, 2014). This implied the limitation of conceptual understanding of the research partners in the development of research skills (Morgan, Cuskelly & Moni, 2014). According to Aldridge, the roles and relationships between the researcher and the research partners are crucial to undergo constant accommodation and negotiation. The advantage of my prior field experience has granted me the promise in gaining their cooperation in this respect.

My reflections on the overall research process not only contributed to research authenticity, but also broadened and deepened my understanding on the approach to attain holistic well-being of young adults with learning disabilities through productive communication and a less conventional approach in adapting to the research partners' needs (Aldridge, 2014; Buettgen, et al., 2012). Initially, I perceived my exploration of reflective practice to examine practice such as peer mediation. Now, I understand reflective practice represents a means of drawing together various strands of knowledge, experiences and concerns. This includes facilitating an exploration of possible interpretations based on that knowledge, experiences and concerns. From the findings, reflective practice was evident in peer mediation, review meetings and discussions where knowledge, experiences and concerns were drawn together in its application for the well-being of each other as an

enabling process towards the development of research skills. It was complemented by the notion of their participation in planning for interview question, collecting data through interviews, transcribing and analysing data by using NVivo. The process of learning has built production communication between us when their needs and personal challenges were adapted practically.

Aldridge (2014) suggested the researchers to step outside the boundaries of conventional methodology to make research possible for individuals with different learning needs. In this study, as I took the liberty to go beyond conventional methodology, I had to be selective in the area my research partners were able to participate together. There was the emphasis of mutuality with a degree of subjectivity where life experience is explicate and represented in this study. Moreover, I had to be sensitive to the variation in growth between the research partners based on my knowledge, experience and concern with them in peer mediation from the beginning of the study (Chapman, et al., 2011). Both of them showed evidence of growth in knowledge about research and understanding the project with developing ability but at a different rate of learning capacity and response (Morgan et al, 2014). This convinces my belief on the importance of reflective practice as a practitioner researcher, which allows and recommends regular reworking of the strands in a move towards increasing confidence in the representation. Hence, I perceive the process to be creative, emotive and challenging.

Concluded by Aldridge (2014), the way forward for participatory action research as a transformative learning process is 'far from straightforward' in the methodological, philosophical and professional dilemmas which need to be reviewed to achieve its impact to transform lives, perspectives and systems. I strongly agreed with Bigby, Frawley and Ramcharan (2014) that a strong self-advocacy movement is

critical and fundamental as one of the conditions for inclusive research to flourish besides leading us towards a better quality of research by understanding the lives of people with learning disabilities.

### **Limitation of the Study**

Peer mediation was found effective within the setting of the study as all involved knew and participated in the process at their own capacity underpinning the model of self-advocacy, peer mediation and conflict resolution. However, some limitations were noted during the study which in return has provided opportunity for me as the main researcher and the research partners to take note for future endeavours in relevance to the self-advocacy development and the inclusive research agenda. The limitation of the study is being discussed in 3 sections; firstly, on the participation from the actors of the study, secondly, on the knowledge sharing and thirdly on participatory action research.

### **Participation from the Actors of the Study**

Actors of the study included the peer mediators, the research participants and the support staff of whom has encountered some limitations in their participation in this study.

**Peer mediators.** Peer mediators were considered as the main actor of the study. The selection of peer mediators was recommended by the Lead Coordinator of Centre U based on her personal observation upon discussion and agreement with the main researcher. The selection might be biased in nature based on the leadership potential of the participants which might cause conflict of interest to other parties. The definition of 'leadership' skill might differ and could be challenged in many instances. Other young adults with learning disabilities who might have leadership capacity and are working in open employment were not

included for this study even though they might be interested to learn the skills due to logistics reason. It was important to take note of this discrepancy and explained it to any parties who needed such explanation.

Moreover, there was the risk for selected peer mediators to over-estimate their ability and they might want to give up during the study. It was essential for me to explain the purpose of the study and commitment to take part in the study as peer mediators for the whole study and research partners for Cycle 3 and made all effort to ensure their commitment with positive mindset and constant reminders. Each of them has different educational background and learning style which at some point has limited the learning progress as a team. Hence, I needed to be creative and open-minded in my attempt to design the training content based on the ability and potential of the recommended participants on top of making sure the building of team spirit during the training. When personal needs were needed, personal guidance was provided to support their understanding of the training programme. Moreover, I have intentionally gathered their thoughts on the appropriateness of the designed activities to be most relevant to their level of learning for personal fulfillment. This has enhanced their learning effort in this study.

**Research participants.** Research participants have come to know each other and have interacted with one another prior to the study and training. Previous encounters and interactions might affect the data when the actors have any unresolved conflicts which might cause unwillingness to interact and participate in peer mediation during the study, and beyond their ability to communicate and speak. For instance, we noted a few members showed unwillingness to go for peer mediation even though they were involved in some conflicts. Peer mediators and I perceived they were not ready for peer mediation and took the step to respect their

decision. Therefore, it is essential for me and the research partners to make more effort in explaining and making sure of their understanding about the purpose of the study for a better flow of participation to take place.

However, the participation of the some 'challenging' members was not congruent at times. Even though visual scripts were designed to bridge the communication gap, there should be more effort in relational building as discussed earlier. For instance, due to the inexperience of Maelyn and Joe, they found it challenging to understand the speech and gesture of the 'challenging' members as compared to Wynn who has worked in Centre U for 11 years. As I noted the need for more relational building between Maelyn and Joe with the members, they were encouraged to spend more time with the members during lunch break and initiate some conversations with the members. On the other hand, the body gestures used by the 'challenging' members during data collection might be misinterpreted by any one of us. This was noted and overcome by team review and discussion in making our interpretation and analysis when Wynn made her contribution based on her experience with the members. We also used video analysis to support our interpretation.

It was noted that the objectives of this study focuses on the ability of peer mediators. Hence, the abilities of research participants were not prominent though they participated and contributed to the process and findings of the study. For instance, research participants did not have the opportunity to go through and learn about their coping style of conflict resolution based on the model of conflict resolution. This includes other topics of training in developing their knowledge of self which should be important for all young adults with learning disabilities. This limitation shall be noted for the suggestion of the study.

**Support staff.** The research partners and I noted some of the support staff managed the conflict as part of their responsibility and did not seem to understand the rationale and process even though I have explained it over a few staff meetings. This made the implementation of peer mediation more challenging when peer mediators did not have the opportunity to provide peer mediation service on some occasions. To a certain extent, it was difficult to hold the community together in this paradigm shift of mindset to believe in the ability of the peer mediators. For instance, support staff P and K joined the research project at Cycle 2. Their presence required explanation of the aims of research project. They were allowed to observe peer mediation training to understand the setting of peer mediation. From time to time, reminders on their roles as support staff were needed to allow opportunity for peer mediators to take charge.

This interruption has re-directed my research objectives to be more focused on the role of self-advocacy in building the ability of peer mediators, as a community of learners based on the research objectives towards personal fulfillment. This makes me to put more effort in explaining the meaning of self-advocacy and promoting their abilities by sharing on the effectiveness of peer mediation with the support staff during our monthly meeting. Peer mediators were encouraged to speak up their position with the support staff during the meeting and in their daily working relationship. This was a strategy to strengthen the application of self-advocacy where peer mediators became more confident to explain their cause of action.

### **Knowledge Sharing**

This study only involved one selected organization Centre U in Selangor, Malaysia due to the limited number of years since the development of the self-advocacy movement in this country. Even though invitations were sent for other self-

advocacy groups to join the training in Cycle 3, the offer was not well-received and limited the opportunity to share knowledge with other young adults with learning disabilities in different settings. However, only two self-advocacy groups responded and joined the peer mediation training. Sharing of knowledges and resources took its position in Cycle 3. The participation of Centre C and Centre D in peer mediation training has granted much knowledge of peer mediation to the self-advocates but not in the application of knowledge as planned. We have heard and understood their challenge to carry on the training and practice due to the internal re-structure of their programme in Centre C. Centre D agreed to take on U+Me training but did not manage to practice peer mediation in their setting. According to the management, it was explained that the members were not ready to conduct the service in their setting (Lily, personal communication, 29 May 2016).

The challenge to follow through peer mediation in other self-advocacy groups did not provide any evidence to replicate the model of peer mediation in this study as the research was constrained by my available time and ability to travel. The constraints of time and fundings were noted even though the involvement of other more established self-advocacy groups in other states might have yielded stronger results. This limited the data collection comparatively, but re-directed the study to focus on building the peer mediators in Centre U for future self-advocacy and peer mediation development. Research partners and I decided to re-focus the sharing of knowledge to develop ourselves in terms of our self-determination and self-advocacy skills towards our quality of life. From this experience, we realized the critical needs in sustaining the self-advocacy movement with a more sustainable leadership development programme and practice. The study focused on the development of peer

mediators is taken as a step for leadership development in strengthening the role of self-advocacy.

It can be argued that the database from the limited number of participants for this qualitative study may result in the study not being able to be generalized in other settings. However, the findings based on the voices of young adults with learning disabilities are noted as the valid evidence based on the model self-advocacy in its application in Malaysia. I believe this study can be a good reference point for other self-advocacy group to re-think their role in supporting one another in a community in promoting lifelong learning for all. Moreover, the findings should also provide more evidence for the role of community to take note on the abilities and potential of young adults with learning disabilities. Hence, the production of peer mediation training programme and handbook is planned to be published and hoped to be replicable in other self-advocacy groups in Malaysia and other region in due time.

### **Participatory Action Research**

The choice of participatory action research has provided much concern in its cause for implementation and completion particularly among the academics as public knowledge with epistemic claims beyond the practice setting (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As participatory action research taking its position collaboratively, diverse and in-depth data was developed over the 3 cycles in both insider and outsider perspectives. During the research process, this has caused difficulties for me as the main researcher due to some messy collective work. Moreover, the re-structuring of Centre U has delayed the timeline for data collection. Nevertheless, to keep the data manageable within my planned time frame, I have intentionally limited the data based on the research questions with my utmost discipline in my time management.

The notion of participatory action research has resulted in some challenges during the course of participation by the research partners in this study. As I needed to upkeep my timeline, it was challenging to open the opportunity to recruit other potential young adults with learning disabilities to be the research partners (Balcazar, et al., 2006). Hence, the peer mediators were granted the opportunity with the assumption of the research skills being developed through peer mediation. Besides, the progress of research partners in executing their roles has limited the control of the research process. Amongst the identified skills to be developed into research skills, writing and reflecting have been noted as the most challenging for both research partners. For instance, Wynn has difficulties in her language proficiency and Maelyn found it hard to progress her learning points into the implication for practice. When they spoke up their struggles and challenges, I needed to take time to listen and understand their need and capacity in order to provide appropriate support to actively challenge their reflection skills to generate insider knowledge by forming valid data for this naturalistic study (Bigby & Frawley, 2010). This has added on the challenge in my time management.

As noted in Chapter 3, the research was designed by me as the main researcher based on my personal observation and field experience for the requirement of my doctoral study. The limitation was it did not fulfill the five criteria of an inclusive research where the research questions were owned by people with learning disabilities (Walmsley & Team, 2014). My assertion is the involvement of the research partners when they were given the opportunity to become active in Cycle 3 even though some research skills were developed in Cycle 1 based on the research objectives (Bjornsdottir & Svendsdottir, 2008). This has yielded longer time spent in explaining to the research partners about the research objectives and data

analysis (Greenwood, 2017). Moreover, as they take on the role of research partners, their research knowledge and skills are practiced through doing transcribing and data analysis with ongoing explanation and encouragement as their experiential learning (Morgan, et al., 2014). Often, for instance, they could not link and recall what had happened due to their memory problem, attention span and learning differences. For data analysis, Maelyn found it more challenging in linking the data into themes. Hence, the use of video and audio records has been helpful to regain the memory of research partners in providing concrete evidence during data analysis. As they did not attend any proper research training, this has limited their research knowledge and skills. More explanation and reminders were needed as an ongoing learning for the research partners.

Subsequently, when they could not understand and carried out their responsibilities as research partners, they lost motivation in contributing and became frustrated. I needed to take extra time to use different strategies and explain the research process in a few rounds, besides encouraging and motivating them (Aldridge, 2014; Chapman, 2013). They were able to share about their struggles as research partners besides their daily work commitment. This has granted me the insight to constantly balance the implication for power and control in understanding their inner struggles and needs for personal development. Steps of understanding and support were provided based on their voices upon discussion with the support staff as expert review of the data. For instance, we allocated time once a week to meet for discussion and data analysis in Cycle 3. Expert review from other field was not being considered due to time limitation and limited experts in the self-advocacy development in Malaysia. Hence, we took the position to involve the support staff as expert reviewers based on their working relationship with young adults with learning

disabilities. This has extended the learning timeframe for research, data collection and data analysis. The argument is based on practical knowledge rather than research epistemology and methodology which in the construction of reality.

### **Implication for Practice**

The findings and discussion points shaped the implication to bring us forward to meet the broader societal challenges in the development of social interdependence as an antidote in achieving the social inclusion agenda and a better quality of life by young adults with learning disabilities and the community generally. The focus of the study was on young adults with learning disabilities' subjective experiences rather than quantifiable, measurable outcomes. Qualitative methods were appropriate for this study as it is unlikely that measurable change would have been witnessed at the end of the study. The assertion is to explicate the role of self-advocacy in its practical terms towards knowledge transformation when the lives of young adults with learning disabilities are empowered and enabled. Hence, personal change and transformation was expected as a transformative learning experience underpinning the theoretical framework of the study.

I believe this is the only study in Malaysia and the local region that we are aware of on the provision of peer mediation training directly to young adults with learning disabilities in a community setting and the only study on the topic that has systematically gathered qualitative data from young adults with learning disabilities. Implications for this study are discussed in three aspects as we move forward from this study: theoretical advancement, practical development and research design.

## **Implications for Theoretical Advancement**

The findings of this study have implied the integration of theories in the theoretical framework of the study. The implementation of peer mediation as an innovative activity and service by young adults with learning disabilities is based on critical theory (Hansen, 2008), theory of human motivation (Maslow, 1954) and social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). Each of these theories derived from the promotion of self-advocacy in peer mediation for conflict resolution in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. Though it provided a solid base for its application, the argument is how far the theory could be put into practice.

Based on the findings of this study, from the perspective of social justice and equality, peer mediation has seen its implication to allow young adults with learning disabilities to speak up their voices from the oppressive lives they have been living (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). They have become active citizens in their own way to support one another, most critically, to solve their own problem in the social reality. The criticism of critical theory where young adults with learning disabilities has limited opportunity to deal with conflicts in their lives would be argued based on the findings in this study (Payne, 2005). This brought us to re-think how we perceive the lives of these young adults with learning disabilities, whether as a passive object without much conflict or active beings with inter-relational encounters which include conflicts.

As Critical Theory runs the risk of dismissing the well-being of young adults with learning disabilities, Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation looks into the personal needs towards social participation of their lives in this study in attaining their state of self-actualisation. We need to look beyond the oppressive social context of these young adults (Caldwell, 2010). It is a collaborative progressive

transformation for these young adults to accept and embrace their ‘limitation’ or differences as defined as they progress to fulfill their inner needs. Asserted by Vehmas and Watson (2014), ‘as long as people are genuinely free to decide for themselves and feel about themselves however they wish to feel, we are pretty close to relational justice, free from hierarchical evils’. The implication of the findings of this study based on the Theory of Human Motivation has made its relational outcome through peer mediation by young adults with learning disabilities.

The findings from the ability of peer mediators have provided evidence for them to work within their capabilities against social injustice (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). On top of their personal fulfillment, peer mediators and research partners worked on what they have access to, and what they can do with it. This includes internal resources, such as their self-advocacy and peer mediation skills, and external resources, such as gaining community support from the support staff. The effectiveness of this collaboration depends on the structure of operating within the services underpinning the implication of Social Interdependence Theory. The genuine opportunities of peer mediation have opened the avenue for the interaction of this social structure in improving the quality of life of young adults with learning disabilities with the recognition of equal rights of all from the environment. In this study, the social changes gained through peer mediation have enhanced the personal fulfillment and social status of young adults with learning disabilities. This means both personal and social factors are significant in the application of Maslow’s Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory to the achievement of holistic well-being and transformation of life for sustainability.

The application of the inter-relationship between Critical Theory, Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory has provided a better

understanding about their connections in this study as a process of transformation towards conflict resolution. These theories offer a framework that is used to communicate and clarify the practical development of using self-advocacy skills in peer mediation for conflict resolution. The findings of the study have illuminated the inter-relationship of these theories in the process of working the self and our relationships with others. In return, it has shine light of the meaning of interdependence to understand critical learning disability amidst our stive in the social inclusion agenda.

Theoretical advancement should further another higher level of thinking about these theories to better equip the practitioners, including the self-advocates to make well-considered choices in the self-advocacy development for the social inclusion agenda to be realised. My assertion is these theories are not be mutually exclusive in its application, they have shown criterion of commonality for the validity of the phenomena in the life progression of young adults with learning disabilities in relation to their living condition. Hence, the fruitfulness of these theories has provided the case for critical realism in the form of life-world perspective closely related to these young adults' lives and it is necessary for us as the researcher and practitioners to understand the relativity of the theories in understanding disability amidts complexity in our community support system.

### **Implication for Practical Development**

It is clear from the literature in Chapter 2 and findings in Chapter 4 that self-advocacy is not a convincing approach to be utilized by most practitioners and services. The establishment of many service organisations has yet to take the ideology of self-advocacy as their core values in developing the sense of self in young adults with learning disabilities. This includes the development of self-

advocacy at school level in Malaysia. In the study of Loh and Sharifah Zainiyah (2013) in exploring transitional needs and developing effective transitional plan for adolescents and young adults with learning disabilities in Malaysian context, self-advocacy skills training is listed as one of the essential skills towards meaningful adulthood. Even though it might seem challenging for the schools and service organisations to adopt and take on this approach as a paradigm shift in providing them the services and supporting the adolescents and young adults as decision makers, it is not an impossible task. Regardless of the challenges faced, this research has proven the role of self-advocacy in creating positive identities in the lives of people with learning disabilities (Anderson & Bigby, 2017). The practical development of peer mediation has been intentionally provided the evidence as an innovation and synergy in this study. Hence, it is important for us to be creative and innovative whilst we keep looking forward to re-think and re-synergise about the possible practical development to improve the quality of life of these young adults who have so much ability and potential.

Taking on this paradigm shift means there is a reversible role between the professional practitioners and the individuals and/or young adults with learning disabilities. This paradigm shift takes much effort and time as it requires increased emphasis on person-centred planning underpinning the ideology and belief of human rights (Chapman, et al., 2011; Fyson & Cromby, 2013). Promoting self-advocacy and practicing self-advocacy is two different issues. It is noted as a gap between the theoretical and the practical aspects of self-advocacy (Armstrong, 2002). As the practitioners, we can take the liberty to promote self-advocacy. But, to achieve critical realism, we have the responsibility to bridge the practical gap of self-advocacy by empowering and enabling the self-advocates in fulfilling their roles as a

community of people. As noted, the many life experiences shared and research has brought self-advocacy to the next level (Chapman, et al., 2011; Wilson, 2013). Building implications for self-advocacy development shall include both promotion and practices as a means to fill the gap with the aim to increase the role and impact of self-advocacy in the lives of people with learning disabilities for a better quality of life.

The notion of only one self-advocacy organization in Malaysia has seen its challenges for the service organisations to believe in the ability of people with learning disabilities to run an organization. On the other hand, the 12-year self-advocacy development as an organization promoting and expanding the self-advocacy movement throughout Malaysia has seen its impact in the lives of the self-advocates in Malaysia (Pang, Loh & Ahmad Zabidi, 2016). Running an organization in a collective regime has built the implication for self-advocacy development where people with learning disabilities gain more choices and control within their lives (Caldwell, 2010). It is a comprehensive real experiential learning to run an organization as a collective organization representing people with learning disabilities with positions and real responsibilities. But, it is not impossible. This requires further shifts towards person-centred thinking within service cultures which in return to provide more opportunities for people to speak up for what they want (Wilson, 2013). What is self-advocacy when their opportunity is deprived? Self-advocacy can play a vital role in enabling people with learning disabilities to challenge services of which they are entitled for.

Further evidence is needed especially in the area of advocacy support, for example about the practical approach in providing advocacy support to different level of support needed by people with learning disabilities and in different contexts

(Anderson & Bigby, 2017; Chapman, et al., 2011; Chapman & Tilley, 2013; Wilson, 2013). This highlighted the critical need on the role of interdependency among the stakeholders in supporting advocacy to achieve its meaning (Tilley, 2013). This means the evidence of direct outcomes of advocacy support is important to be captured and measured in some ways to provide advocacy services to demonstrate their worth. The findings from this study have measured its worth to a certain mileage.

Fish (2016) is her research study noted about the notion of service-users led conflict resolution in a locked ward in the United Kingdom. Service-users lead discussion promotes self-advocacy. Though it was not structured like peer mediation service in this study, the point is people with learning disabilities are able to resolve conflict and establish supportive relationship among themselves. Such evidence gives opportunity to share the findings from this study for practical development in different settings such as hospitals, community centres and group homes. It is arguable to conclude that peer mediation is the best way to fill the gaps in self-advocacy in different self-advocacy groups and different contexts (Chapman, et al., 2011). The point is peer mediation fills the gaps for rights-based approach, person-centred approach, watching brief approach, witness-observer approach and best interest approach as we search for evidence of the best approach in advocacy support underpinning restorative justice (Cremin, Sellman & McCluskey, 2012; Tilley, 2013). Peer mediation in this study has led to positive outcomes in demonstrating its worth in its implication. Hence, further evidence is needed to capture the impact of peer mediation in the self-advocacy movement.

## **Implication for Research Development**

As a participatory action researcher, this study scratched the surface of an area in which I am deeply interested – that of identity transformation and formation in relation to the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. Reciprocally, it informs my profession and the theories of practice of my involvement in the field. My strong desire in doing this research was not to say peer mediation is one model better than any other models. Rather, I am using this platform to uncover areas of interdependency and complementarity, areas of contrast and improvement, and to work towards a better quality of life for each of us, particularly with the young adults with learning disabilities amidst its complexity (Bigby, Frawley & Ramcharan, 2014). I believe my involvement in the real-life experiences has developed emergent and pragmatic approaches that truly support meaningful transformation as a new vision for humanity (Dustman, Kohan & Stringer, 2014).

The cyclical research design has provided different levels of learning as progression for the research partners, the experiential learning approach constituted a novel approach to the learning process in this participatory research. This builds the implication for practices to take note of the potential and possibilities for the development of research skills in young adults with learning disabilities (Morgan, et al., 2014; Strnadov Cumming, Knox, Parmenter & Welcome to Our Class Research Group, 2014). The findings from the research partners shall add to the knowledge about approaches to inform the future participatory research design. The implication to provide the platform for young adults with learning disabilities to own the research questions and design the research methodology shall be the next initiative as part of their research skills development practice (Walmsley & Team, 2014). This will

provide a more realistic interest for them to further their research skills with more impact.

Moreover, the implications should include the intention to challenge perceptions – of disability and possibility, for example, stereotypes to revitalise and strengthen community action (Aldridge, 2014). I believe the findings from this study will assist in the development and design of future participatory action research projects where the people with learning disabilities should be considered as having the power and potential in the field of disabilities studies and inclusive research agenda (Bjornsdottir & Svendsdottir, 2008). The critical point lies in how the policy makers and researchers in the academia perceive the presence and voice of people with learning disabilities. The findings of the study have been rewarding and empowering for me as the main researcher as well as the research partners which should provide the valuable evidence for future research development in collaboration with young adults with learning disabilities.

### **Suggestions from the Study**

This study has highlighted the ability and voice of young adults with learning disabilities as the actors of the study. It is also important that the views and voices of young adults with learning disabilities are included in the evidence base and that qualitative information is collected on their opinions and experiences to ensure that the use of self-advocacy in peer mediation is acceptable and applicable to them and to gain their perspectives on important outcomes and the reasons for the success or otherwise of conflict resolution interventions. Suggestions from this study are discussed based on the implication of this study for theoretical advancement, practical development and research design.

We have witnessed self-advocacy skills being fully practiced for social justice and equality of life, we have witnessed the improved quality of relationship among young adults with learning disabilities and its environment, we have witnessed peace through peer mediation. When we put on the critical lens of Critical Theory, Theory of Human Motivation and Social Interdependence Theory in practice, in this study, in peer mediation, we witnessed structural social changes taking its position in assisting these young adults to take charge of their own lives. Its impact goes beyond the personal to social context of constructive conflict management. Hence, it is suggested to further strengthen the self-advocacy skills in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities with varieties of training activities which should enhance their ability and confidence in a sustainable manner. This could be carried out by extending the **U+Me** training activities. Some part of the activities of peer mediation could be simplified to cater for other young adults in developing their knowledge of self. The development of self-advocacy skills is suggested to be implemented in a progressive and achievable manner by understanding the needs of the young adults and the setting of the self-advocacy groups. According to Vehman and Watson (2014), for them to achieve participatory parity resulting from the transformation, they need recognition. This is real needs and it represents real differences through peer mediation in this study.

Young adults with learning disabilities gained recognition through productive communication and progressive personal fulfilment from the self-advocacy development. The acceptance of their differences in peer mediation moves us forward to ideological changes with the attainment of social emotional development based on self-advocacy skills. For instance, the development of confidence and sense of self has enabled the peer mediators to actively challenge the *status quo* that has

entangled their lives. To claim their rights, power and participation, they realized and accepted their own differences. Subsequently, this has enlarged the horizon of self-advocacy development when young adults with learning disabilities take action on their own account. Hence, it is suggested to strive on the self-advocacy development in each individual's lives towards a collective development.

As we have witnessed the positive outcomes of using self-advocacy to speak up, make decisions and seek help in this study, the practice is suggested to be continued and enhanced as a progressive development. This study has focus on the involved young adults in whom I believe has provided positive role models for other young adults with learning disabilities in the self-advocacy movement to demonstrate meaningful participation and inclusion. For instance, their involvement in providing insights to the **PM** training and **PM** visual scripts was intentionally designed to validate the usefulness and relevance of peer mediation to the young adults. Hence, I believe it would be useful to consult their opinions underpinning self-advocacy to inform the development of future peer mediation programmes to the other self-advocacy groups in the movement.

The impact of peer mediation service throughout the study has given us opportunity to suggest for future practical development. As the study came to an end, the peer mediators, the support staff and I discussed its implication for practice. As the research partners were confident about what they have learned, and committed to make it a point to continue the service in the organization, we suggested it is possible to replicate this model to other self-advocacy groups at the national and regional level with the intention to strengthen the self-advocacy development when opportunity arises. This may include conducting the **U&Me** training by the young adults with learning disabilities and/or peer mediators, follow by peer mediation

training as a collaborative training with the practitioners based on the approach used in this study.

In the research project by Chapman et al., (2011), a consistent finding was noted on the need for advocates to provide necessary support to their peers and to help them to make good choices. Peer mediation has made its way in by providing opportunity for young adults with learning disabilities to speak up 'more' (Appendix W). Hence, this person-led service should extend its effort in its information sharing between services and other self-advocacy groups in an accessible and understandable manner. We believe that only by listening to young adults with learning disabilities through peer mediation can we enhance the practical development of self-advocacy in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities for the betterment of community living. In hind sight, we suggest to make regular and progressive evaluation on the impact of self-advocacy and peer mediation programme by young adults with learning disabilities to maintain its quality and meaning for application in due cause.

One of the strengths of this study was that it was a partnership research project which meant that the research partners were assumed to have some range of skills and experiences that were invaluable for this study (Bjornsdottir & Svensdottir, 2008; Chapman, et al., 2011). This includes their self-advocacy knowledge and skills, their reflective practices through observation and diary writing, and their transcribing and analysing as research skills. Some skills were pre-learned but most were new skills acquired. The point is participatory research has granted the research partners the confidence to plan and implement changes in the research process when their voices are heard and opinions are taken into consideration for action in a progressive manner (Buettgen et al., 2012; Chapman, et al., 2011). Such notion has manifested

their ability to advocate for social change in the context of rights and responsibilities as active citizens. Hence, this shall provide the evidence to share the possibility of conducting collaborative group method of inclusive research based on the value position that people with learning disability have the right to enjoy equal value and respect in all relationships as the suggestion from this study (Bigby, Frawley & Ramcharan, 2014).

On the other hand, the challenges faced during the research process should provide evidence for more research training opportunity to be carried to young adults with learning disabilities besides involving them into disability research projects (Bjornsdottir & Svendsdottir, 2008). It is strongly suggested that the training approach needs to be flexible, interactive and participative where their voices are heard. Strnadov et al. (2014) recommended the importance of team-building and research skills training to achieve success in conducting inclusive disability research. Various innovative strategies were used in building up the researchers with intellectual disabilities including the usage of adaptive technology such as I-Pad. Training involves funding. It is suggested the funding proposal to highlight the ability and potential of young adults with learning disabilities based on the findings of this study. Hence, the Government and funding agencies are urged to re-look into the funding approach in believing what they are enabled for by listening and understanding their stance for social empowerment.

## **Contribution of the Study**

Developing a service such as peer mediation is meaningful and significant to young adults with learning disabilities on a personal and collective level as my contribution of this study. It is bound to create more of a welcome than the imposition of an impersonal regime as the young adults with learning disabilities were given the opportunity to participate at their capacity in line with the purpose of this study.

Recognising this, the development of Peer Mediation training manual and U4Me training guide based on the experience and voice of young adults with learning disabilities underpinning self-advocacy is considered as an area that has not previously been done and implemented neither in Malaysia nor the international agenda in the area of conflict resolution. Their participation has made this study a significant contribution on the field of special needs education into the lived experiences of individuals with learning disabilities.

Moreover, the topic of peer mediation for conflict resolution has provided new insights and breakthrough experience in witnessing the ability of young adults with learning disabilities. This has contributed to the perspective paradigm shift for the professional and practitioner to re-think their support strategies in promoting the ability of young adults with learning disabilities particularly in the social inclusion agenda. It fulfills the meaning of 'nothing about us without us' in the implication for the services provided by the practitioners.

In the field of Malaysian special needs education and research agenda, participatory action research has provided a new page in its implementation where the voices of young adults with learning disabilities are heard underpinning the role of self-advocacy. Previous common disability research in Malaysia using the survey

method yielded quantitative data, case study resulted research participants being discussed as ‘subjects’, and even action research with reflection from the views of researcher did not reflect the voice and fulfill the implication of human rights of young adults with learning disabilities. The participatory action research used in this study is considered as a new paradigm shift in learning disability research where the voices of the actors of the study are heard and noted with respect. Their honest sharing of life and experiences amidst their challenges faced has provided fresh insights for me as the main researcher to re-think and re-consider my position as a practitioner researcher in providing my best support in making an impact to their lives. The contribution in this aspect is hoped to challenge future research using this methodology in believing it as a possible and effective methodology in disability studies and research.

The initiative has proven invaluable learning points in uncovering the young adults with learning disabilities’ significant levels of frustration with the fragmentation of self, the lack of relationship development, and the absence of mechanisms for quality of life as the statement of problem in this study. What I experienced and learned from this study was more than I anticipated. It was evident to note that this study has broken down the barriers to self-determination besides dismantled stereotypical barriers of perceived incompetence of young adults with learning disabilities (Ollerton & Horsfall, 2013). Hence, this has contributed to the construct of learning disabilities in a significant rights-based approach.

Participatory data collection and data analysis presented in this study with the participation of young adults with learning disabilities is noted as the first qualitative research approach undertaken in Malaysia. By participating in this research, I believe the research partners learned about their disability rights particularly in exercising

their rights to research. It has also informed the theory and practice of social inclusion for young adults with learning disabilities (Stevenson, 2014). This has fulfilled the ethos of 'nothing about us without us' in its implication for practice in the self-advocacy movement. Hence, the contribution of this study has highlighted the impact of self-advocacy in the research paradigm as a new direction in learning disability studies and research.

In relation to the Agenda 2030 on the Sustainable Development, this study has contributed to the development of Goal 3 for good health and well-being through peer mediation, Goal 4 in achieving quality education based on the trainings and activities conducted, Goal 5 for gender equality by the participants' profile, Goal 10 in reducing inequalities and Goal 11 to achieve sustainable cities and communities. Hence, this study is making steps to inform how policy and programmes can be improvised to best meet the needs of individuals with learning disabilities. By highlighting the challenges faced by the actors of the study and how the dynamic of power and control is being practiced, it has provided the evidence to build up the capacity of individuals with learning disabilities to achieve the social inclusion agenda. As we work towards achieving the 2030 Agenda, this study has set the momentum to facilitate change amidst context and complexity.

## **Future Possibilities**

From the findings and discussion points of this study, there are many potential future possibilities to be undertaken as research and practice particularly in the field of special education needs. This may include the support staff expectation and mindset building on the ability and potential of young adults with learning disabilities at a more macro level in the community setting. Research on the capacity and competency of advocacy support staff could provide insights in advocacy support in its implementation for sustainability. This includes the synergy of power and control and the approaches of behaviour management in self-advocacy. Greater attention could be paid to the best practices of relational understanding of personhood and the practicality of the theory of human rights as a global development of effective social policies in high-quality research and practice.

As peer mediation is considered as one of its kind of advocacy support provided by young adults with learning disabilities, there is a need to for a larger scale study and for research which explores the long-term outcome of peer mediation in different self-advocacy groups or settings such as group homes and employment training centres. Other research focus could include the development of peer mediation in other self-advocacy settings as a promise of restorative justice in the lives of young adults with learning disabilities. The replication of this model of activity could impact the behavioural and emotional needs of people with learning disabilities in its effectiveness and efficiency as an expansive model. Empirical research that demonstrates the impact of self-advocacy in peer mediation to improve the quality of life of young adults with learning disabilities could be considered as a real growth in learning disability research.

In the area of conducting research, I see possibility in developing participatory action research as a way forward by including young adults with learning disabilities as a social inclusion agenda. Some suggestions for research could include research on their motivations for their life and how research can be a niche in their life purpose. As this study collected a huge range of data which informed the ability and limitation of young adults with learning disabilities, data could be utilized as a guide in planning for future research with them. The data may affect the support services from the professional field. Further research in the role of advocacy support services and its affecting factors could be another area to provide more evidence in the collaboration in achieving interdependency. The idea of 'interdependency' is ambiguous. A scholarly effort could be made to clarify the meaning of this term in the real setting and its implication for practice to live out the meaning.

For me, this study is a process of learning and is derived from supporting young adults with learning disabilities in exploring their own experience in their own terms whilst understanding their own situation better as they do and experience the opportunity to be part of the research process. To be bold and ideal, young adults with learning disabilities could take charge of the whole research process. I believe new possibilities can emerge for them when they are given the opportunity to explore their own issues that resonate with their own understanding and experience (Caldwell, 2010; Greenwood, 2017; Parmenter, 2014). It is also my desire that this study will inspire other researchers to explore alternative action research approaches in order to realise their personal beliefs about creating and sustaining a more just society. Hence, this should gear us towards achieving the social inclusion agenda as an intergrated whole for real disability-related change.

With the expansion of self-advocacy development in the Asia Pacific region, the notion of participatory action research and/or inclusive research could be the next possibility in strengthening the impact of self-advocacy movement in this region. Research participated by individuals with learning disabilities could serve as the strategy to track the impact of self-advocacy in a personal stance, and also as a collective movement in the country and region. The belief on the ability and potential of individuals with learning disabilities should carry the same meaning by allowing them to showcase their abilities at their capacity. Asserted by Buettgen, et al., (2012), emphasis on knowledge transfer and action should be upheld by including individuals with learning disabilities in future research. Such initiatives carry implications for the role of organisations, such as the academic institutions, the government body and the civil society to collaborate in supporting the course of high-quality research and the global development of effective social inclusion policies.

In definite term, this requires synergy of integration between the learning disability within other broader agendas as the way forward. For instance, the Sustainable Development Goals could be identified as the reference agenda to necessitate the global collaboration to the self-advocacy development where individuals with learning disabilities become visible in the social inclusion agenda. As this study fulfills some of the goals, there is much concerted effort to be applied. It is about community engagement in perceiving sustainability where the community needs to consider the needs, perspectives and experiences of all groups within their community including people with learning disabilities (Dustman, et al., 2014; Greenwood, 2017). This includes the policy makers and professional practitioners, not only to just consider them, but to understand and develop them progressively and

transformatively through action research. For instance, what does the experience feel like to these people? Do they feel safe and comfortable in approaching being showcased about their abilities and potential of what is being done? Do we understand not just rationally but empathetically what is happening to people with learning disabilities in their life worlds?

These questions are important because understanding people and their community is not necessarily just a rational thing but it is very often done that way. It is rational from the perspective of the people who devise programs, services, policies and so on. It is their rationality and it does not reflect the experience of the people. It does not reflect how they feel about it. It does not reflect whether or not what is being suggested is possible for them or whether it's threatening to them. So empathetic understanding underpinning human rights approach is what we are seeking when we are doing participatory action research as future possibilities in perceiving sustainability. In this study, it is possible through listening to the voices of young adults with learning disabilities by providing quality of support to achieve meaningful collaboration as the way forward. Hence, it is possible for me to enhance the effort of action research conversations, learning and knowledge sharing in a broader framework locally and globally with other practitioners and researchers in response to the neoliberalism in our individual fields of inquiry (Zhang, Fyn, Langelotz, Lonngren, McCorquodale, & Nehez, 2014). I believe this initiative could build collective reflections in our local contexts for us to envisage new alternatives and generate new perspectives about doing action and inclusive research against the rapid social changes.

## **Concluding Reflection**

Speaking about my experiences when exploring the needs for peer mediation, I asked these two questions, 'Is the journey the destination?' and 'Does the ends justified the means?' I went on to the search for its relevance, and realized self-advocacy movement has acquired a high level of autonomy in the international agenda. The gaps of self-advocacy management skills have been identified throughout the organization and literature. This situation is easily recognizable as common to many other local organisations. Such issues required focus and involvement at the academic level to claim its legitimacy and relevance for policy change, of which I am convinced by the purpose and objectives this study. The recent presentation by Prof Katherine Runswick-Cole in re-imagining the research assemblage towards scholar activism urged us to re-look into the entanglement between the scholarship and activism in critical disabilities study in its application (Runswick-Cole, 2017). The argument is besides fulfilling the research evidence requirement by the research ethics and assessment, how can the impact agenda be upheld to support scholar activism. As I conclude, I began to understand the impact lies in the effort and manner that we strive to evolve and transform as members of disability collective, locally and globally. It starts from us to impart the impact to people around us as we keep on striving in collaboration with our members with disabilities.

Embarking into this participatory action research made me felt that I would be working against the mainstream at times due to the legitimacy of the value of participatory action research as my research design in the conventional academic setting (Klocker, 2012). Though I am aware of the representation of the challenges of partnership with the selected actors of the study, I am convinced of the impact of the

practical knowledge produced upon rigorous investigation in this study. The impetus for me to go into participatory action research was to learn about the world of young adults with learning disabilities that I am working with, and to assist them to make better sense of their own world in their own terms, particularly in the social inclusion agenda. My personal and professional agendas in addition to the macro-level knowledge in the field have helped to shape my intention to take up this challenge to empower young adults with learning disabilities. It seems clear that the challenge was well worth taken as it allows me to draw upon the thinking and representational style with which I am more comfortable and capable, together with my selected research partners as their dynamic and concrete lived experiences. It is an indicator to enable us to link this methodology of research to practical professional change. At the point of ending the research, the challenge to the implications for practice and future possibilities persists in a larger social, political and cultural agenda of which I am overwhelmed with. Ending the research brings to a new beginning and new perspective for the perseverance on the effort in social equality.

This innovative approach in peer mediation and participatory action research has enabled me to capitalize on my experience and expertise as a social practitioner and researcher. It seemed to hold out the promise of enabling me to get ‘more deeply and more closely’ to the reality of young adults with learning disabilities’ perceptions and lived experiences of conflicts. It was more likely for me to reach ‘the person at the centre of settings’ and to ‘recognise the complexity of it all’. Moreover, this study has illuminated the importance of making visible young adults with learning disabilities through self-advocacy by recognizing their voices and presence. As they were given the opportunity to express their experiences and thoughts in their own words, I, as the main researcher helped to build solutions together with them.

Quality of the research was enriched by our virtue of being sensitive to the contextual influences, academic, personal and professional, that have the potential for both constraining and liberating our practices. Ultimately, quality has emerged where we have come together to create something unique over which the young adults with learning disabilities have a strong sense of ownership and commitment upon their transformative journey of learning. It is the 'processes' that contributed to the quality and thus became the bedrock upon which the research 'product' was created. The two could not be separated.

For me personally as practitioner researcher, the more I understand about the human processes of practitioner research, the better I am able to develop my own supportive practices accordingly. I wish the peer mediators and research partners would recognise this as their reflective points in their future undertakings to achieve their personal fulfillment for a holistic well-being. It was a breakthrough learning process for me in conducting this worthwhile research in ways that harmonised with the research questions, professional purposes and talents. I believe there is a crucial need for further research in this area using this methodology. For me, it is a 'big learning in a small setting' which has changed my world of thought (Dustman, et al., 2014). As I came in contact with people who live in a very different way, who live in a very different world and see things in an incredibly different way than I do, I knew I needed to adopt a new perspective and begin to approach things and my work differently. I learned that to remain relevant in this journey is a fundamental principle with the consciousness of the energies coming from the people I am working with. Their responses tell me what they are wanting, where they want to go and what is in their lived experience. Particulars of our lived experiences emerged and shed light on how we explored the possibilities of being empowered and transformed. What they

have achieved may be considered small but I believe those small things grow and can be impactful. This I considered as inspiring and energizing throughout my learning journey in understanding the meaning of humanity and community in its evolvement.

*Community Evolves - A community is only being created when its members accept that they are not going to achieve great things, that they are not going to be heroes, but simply live each day with new hope, like children, in wonderment as the sun rises and in thanksgiving as it sets. Community is only being created when they have recognized that the greatness of humanity lies in the acceptance of our insignificance, our human condition and our earth.*

(Vanier,2017)

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## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS AND PAPERS PRESENTED

### Publication

Pang, J.C., Loh, S.C., & Ahmad Zabidi Abdul Razak. (2016). Self-advocacy movement in Malaysia: Issues, importance and future directions. *Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol. 6, pp. 23-35.

Pang, J.C., Loh, S.C., & Ahmad Zabidi Abdul Razak. (2017). The role of support staff in providing quality of support in peer mediation and conflict resolution among individuals with learning disabilities. *Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol. 7, pp. 24-44.

### Scientific Oral Presentation

#### **I) 15<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Intellectual Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IASSIDD), 14-18 August, 2016 at Melbourne, Australia**

1. J.C. Pang, S.C. Loh & A.Z. Abd Razak. (2016). What's next? The development of self-advocacy in Malaysia. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, Vol 60, p.718.

2. W.S.K. Yeong, M.Y. Lee, J.C. Pang, S.C. Loh & A.Z. Abd Razak. (2016). The impact of self-advocacy in my life in inclusive research. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, Vol 60, p.764.

3. M.Y. Lee, W.S.K. Yeong, J.C. Pang, S.C. Loh & A.Z. Abd Razak. (2016). A journey of empowerment in inclusive research. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, Vol 60, p.695.

4. M.Y. Lee, W.S.K. Yeong, J.C. Pang, S.C. Loh & A.Z. Abd Razak. (2016). A winning solution as peer mediators. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, Vol 60, p.695.

**Congress Abstracts available at: [wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/jir](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/jir)**

#### **II) International Conference on Counseling and Psychology 2017: Professional Networking Towards Community's Well-Being. 9-11 April 2017 at University of Malaya.**

Pang, J.C., Loh, S.C., & Ahmad Zabidi Abdul Razak. (2017). The role of support staff in providing quality of support in peer mediation and conflict resolution among individuals with learning disabilities.

#### **III) 2017 IASSIDD 4th Asia Pacific Regional Congress: From Inclusiveness to Sustainable Development, 13-16 November at Bangkok, Thailand.**

J.C. Pang, S.C. Loh & A.Z. Abd Razak. (2017). Peer mediation as a societal support model by and for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities