

DEVELOPING SKILLS FOR INDEPENDENT DECISION-MAKING AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AMONG INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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Abstract: The present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the situational method as a pedagogical tool for developing decision-making skills, enhancing awareness of consequences, and fostering personal responsibility among individuals with intellectual disabilities. The study employs a set of situational cards containing illustrations and brief descriptions of everyday life situations designed to stimulate moral judgement and the selection of appropriate behavioural responses. The empirical research was conducted in three consecutive stages: initial assessment, educational intervention, and follow-up evaluation. The study involved 10 participants, and the assessment was carried out through pedagogical observation, analysis of participants' responses, and a three-point scale measuring the level of independence in decision-making.

During the intervention phase, the situational cards were systematically implemented through guided discussions, role-playing activities, behavioural modelling, and prompting questions aimed at supporting the understanding of social situations and the development of adaptive behavioural strategies. The results of the comparative analysis between the initial and follow-up assessments demonstrate significant positive changes across all investigated criteria. The overall mean score of the group increased from 1.23 points at the initial assessment to 2.30 points after the educational intervention, representing an 87.0% positive change. The most substantial improvement was observed in the indicators of "*sense of personal responsibility*" and "*awareness of consequences*", which showed increases of 91.6% and 90.9%, respectively.

The analysis of the distribution across levels of independence revealed a substantial reduction in the number of participants requiring full support, alongside an increase in the proportion of individuals demonstrating independent choices and the ability to justify their decisions. The obtained findings indicate that the use of visually presented real-life situations, combined with interactive pedagogical approaches, contributes to the development of moral judgement, social responsibility, and independent behaviour skills. The study confirms the applicability and effectiveness of the situational method as an intervention strategy supporting social adaptation and personal development among individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: situational method, situational cards, intellectual disabilities, independent decision-making, personal responsibility, social adaptation, pedagogical intervention.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of decision-making skills and personal responsibility among individuals with intellectual disabilities represents a key element of contemporary approaches in special education and social work. The concept of self-determination emphasizes the right of individuals with intellectual disabilities to make choices, express preferences, and actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. Contemporary research indicates that these skills are directly associated with quality of life, social inclusion, and individual independence (Kuld et al., 2023; Sheerin et al., 2025).

Independent decision-making is conceptualized as a cognitive and social process involving the evaluation of situations, selection among alternatives, and acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of one's choices. In individuals with intellectual disabilities, this process is often challenged due to limitations in executive functions, abstract thinking, and social cognition (Kaloyanova, 2023; Casey et al., 2023).

However, there is a consensus in the literature that decision-making capacity is not absent but requires appropriate support and environmental adaptation (Kuld et al., 2023). Supported decision-making is a contemporary model that challenges and replaces traditional paternalistic approaches.

Self-determination encompasses four main components:

- autonomy (choice and control);
- self-regulation;
- psychological empowerment;
- self-awareness.

Research demonstrates that individuals with intellectual disabilities often have limited opportunities to develop these components, resulting in lower levels of self-determination (Kuld et al., 2023). Nevertheless, interventions aimed at developing choice-making and participation skills significantly enhance personal autonomy (Willow et al., 2024).

Personal responsibility is associated with understanding the consequences of one's actions and participating in socially acceptable decision-making processes. It should not be regarded as a fixed personal characteristic but rather as a skill that can be developed through education, training, and appropriate support.

Cognitive limitations associated with intellectual disabilities affect information processing, memory, and abstract reasoning abilities (Casey et al., 2023). These characteristics highlight the need for visual, structured, and repetitive instructional methods.

The environment plays a crucial role in this process. Limited opportunities for choice and excessive dependence on caregivers restrict the development of autonomy. Contemporary approaches emphasize that participation in authentic life situations is essential for the acquisition and enhancement of decision-making skills (Sheerin et al., 2025).

Educational programs based on self-determination instruction, such as the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI), have demonstrated effectiveness among students with intellectual disabilities (Shogren et al., 2015; Willow et al., 2024).

Supported skill development represents a set of purposeful approaches aimed at promoting individual autonomy and active participation in decision-making processes and social integration. These strategies are based on the understanding that skill development should not involve replacing an individual's personal judgment, but rather providing structured and sensitive support that preserves the person's right to make personal choices. Within this framework, supported decision-making is considered a key approach in which family members, professionals, and social workers facilitate the decision-making process without assuming full control over it. This creates a balance between the provision of necessary support and the preservation of personal autonomy (Martinis, 2015; Kuld et al., 2023).

An additional element in skill development is social situation-based learning, which includes both real-life and simulated interaction contexts. This approach enables individuals to improve their decision-making abilities in conditions that resemble everyday challenges, thereby increasing their adaptability and confidence in social environments (Fusinska-Korpik et al., 2024). Furthermore, individualized educational interventions, including Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and adapted curricula, play a significant role in promoting autonomy by providing needs-based support and structured learning opportunities tailored to the individual (Willow et al., 2024).

The role of families and professionals is particularly significant, as they function as key mediators in the process of developing personal responsibility. Their role involves creating opportunities for choice, encouraging independence, and avoiding overprotective practices that may hinder the development of autonomy. In this way, they contribute to the formation of sustainable skills for self-regulation and social participation (Parchomiuk et al., 2025).

Despite the significance of these approaches, a number of challenges and barriers continue to limit their effectiveness. Among the most prominent are persistent social stereotypes and low expectations regarding the capabilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities, limited access to appropriate educational and training programs, and institutional dependency, which hinders processes of individualization. An additional challenge is the insufficient preparation of professionals involved in the provision of support services, contributing to the inconsistent implementation of evidence-based practices (Moreira et al., 2025).

The primary aim of the present study is to examine the effectiveness of using situational cards as a pedagogical tool for developing independent decision-making skills among individuals with intellectual disabilities. In this context, the study investigates the extent to which the situational method facilitates: (1) the acquisition and development of independent decision-making skills; (2) the development of the ability to recognize and evaluate the consequences of one's own actions; and (3) the enhancement of a sense of personal responsibility when making behavioral choices across a range of everyday life situations.

The study included ten adults with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, aged between 30 and 50 years. All participants were service users of a Day Care Centre for Adults with Disabilities. A purposive (non-probability) sampling strategy was employed based on predefined inclusion criteria related to participants' cognitive abilities, their capacity to comprehend the content of the situational cards, and their ability to actively engage in the planned educational activities. This sampling approach ensured the collection of reliable data regarding the impact of the implemented pedagogical intervention on the development of the targeted skills.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

As the primary research instrument, a set of cards containing illustrations and brief textual descriptions of everyday life situations was used. The situations were selected in such a way as to stimulate decision-making and moral judgment.

The cards were used to present the following situations:

- "You find a lost wallet on the street. What would you do?"
- "A friend invites you to go out, but you have a task to complete at home."
- "You are given too much change in a shop. What do you do?"

- “Someone insults you. How do you react?”

Participants provided their responses by choosing between two or three predefined alternatives or by giving a free verbal response. When necessary, they received support from a specialist.

The research methodology was implemented in three consecutive stages: an initial diagnostic stage, a training stage, and a control stage.

Stage 1. Initial Diagnostic Assessment

During the initial stage, the participants were presented with the situational cards without any prior training or preparation. The aim was to determine the baseline level of their skills related to identifying problematic situations, making decisions, and demonstrating responsible behaviour. Participants' reactions and choices were recorded, and the assessment was conducted based on the following indicators:

- correctness of the selected decision;
- level of pedagogical support required;
- degree of understanding of the content and meaning of the presented situation.

Stage 2. Training Stage

The training intervention was carried out through the systematic use of situational cards within two to three sessions per week. Each situation was analysed collaboratively with the participants through targeted discussions aimed at:

- developing an understanding of the presented situation;
- identifying possible courses of action;
- analysing the potential consequences of each possible behavioural response.

To promote the development of independent decision-making skills and socially acceptable behaviour, various pedagogical approaches and methods were applied during the training process, including:

- guiding and stimulating questions;
- role-playing activities;
- modelling and demonstration of appropriate behavioural patterns.

Stage 3. Control Stage

After the completion of the training period, the situational cards were presented again under conditions analogous to those of the initial diagnostic assessment. The obtained results were compared with the initially recorded indicators in order to identify changes in participants' decision-making skills, level of independence, and demonstration of responsible behaviour.

To collect empirical data, a set of complementary methods was employed, including:

- systematic pedagogical observation based on predefined criteria;
- documentation of participants' responses and behavioural reactions;
- assessment using a scale designed to determine the level of independence in decision-making.

The assessment scale was three-level and included the following categories:

- 1 point – the participant requires full support in selecting an appropriate solution;
- 2 points – the participant demonstrates partial independence but requires guidance or additional assistance;
- 3 points – the participant independently selects an appropriate solution and provides justification for the chosen decision.

The collected empirical data were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the situational method as a tool for the formation and development of independent decision-making skills, responsible behaviour, and social adaptation among individuals with intellectual disabilities.

3. RESULTS

The study examines the three main criteria outlined in the research objective: Criterion 1: Independent Decision-Making, Criterion 2: Awareness of Consequences, and Criterion 3: Personal Responsibility. To assess changes in the level of autonomy, a comparative analysis is conducted based on predefined criteria. The analysis is performed by comparing the results recorded before and after the intervention, using a three-point rating scale. The data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the Group's Mean Scores (N=10)

Evaluation Indicator	Baseline Assessment (Mean Value)	Follow-up Assessment (Mean Value)	Improvement (Score Points)	Percentage of Positive Change
Indicator 1: Ability to Make Independent Decisions	1.40	2.50	+1.10	78.5%
Indicator 2: Recognition of the Consequences of Actions	1.10	2.10	+1.00	90.9%

Indicator 3: Development of a Sense of Personal Responsibility	1.20	2.30	+1.10	91.6%
Overall Group Results	1.23	2.30	+1.07	87.0%

Source: Author's data (2026).

The results of the comparative analysis between the initial assessment and the control phase demonstrate a clear positive trend across all examined criteria related to the development of personal responsibility and independence among the students.

Regarding the criterion “Independent Decision-Making”, the mean score increased from 1.40 to 2.50 points, representing an improvement of 1.10 points or 78.5%. This result indicates a significant enhancement in the ability of individuals with intellectual disabilities to make independent choices and demonstrate initiative when addressing various situations.

For the criterion “Awareness of Consequences”, an increase in the mean score from 1.10 to 2.10 points was observed. The recorded improvement of 1.00 point corresponds to a 90.9% positive change. The data suggest that the participants developed a greater awareness of the relationship between their own actions and the consequences resulting from them.

The most substantial positive development was identified in the criterion “Sense of Personal Responsibility”, where the mean score increased from 1.20 to 2.30 points. The recorded growth of 1.10 points represents a 91.6% improvement compared with the initial level, indicating the strengthening of personal engagement and a more responsible attitude toward assigned tasks.

The aggregated results for the group demonstrate an increase in the mean score from 1.23 to 2.30 points. The overall improvement of 1.07 points corresponds to an 87.0% positive change. The obtained findings confirm the effectiveness of the implemented pedagogical interventions and demonstrate sustained development of independence, responsibility, and conscious behavioural skills among the participants in the study.

For a more detailed analysis, the responses of the 10 participants were classified into three levels: Low (1 point), Medium (2 points), and High (3 points), and are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Levels of Independence

Criteria and Levels	Initial Assessment (%)	Control Stage (%)	Dynamics (percentage points)
Criterion 1: Decision-Making			
Low level (Complete assistance required)	70%	10%	-60 pp ↓
Medium level (Partial independence)	20%	30%	+10 pp ↑
High level (Fully mature choice)	10%	60%	+50 pp ↑
Criterion 2: Awareness of Consequences			
Low level (Complete assistance required)	90%	20%	-70 pp ↓
Medium level (Partial independence)	10%	50%	+40 pp ↑
High level (Fully mature choice)	0%	30%	+30 pp ↑
Criterion 3: Personal Responsibility			
Low level (Complete assistance required)	80%	10%	-70 pp ↓
Medium level (Partial independence)	20%	50%	+30 pp ↑
High level (Fully mature choice)	0%	40%	+40 pp ↑

Source: Author's data (2026).

The initial diagnostic stage revealed significant difficulties among the participants regarding the recognition and resolution of moral and social dilemmas. During the first presentation of the “Situation Cards,” which included cases such as finding a lost wallet or receiving more change than was owed, between 70% and 90% of the

participants demonstrated a low level of independence in decision-making. Difficulties were observed in identifying the core of the problem without additional guiding questions from the specialist. Responses were often impulsive and did not reflect an understanding of the moral and legal aspects of the situations presented. For example, some participants stated that they would keep a found wallet and use the money inside for personal needs. In situations involving interpersonal conflicts and experiences of insult, aggressive reactions or social withdrawal were predominant, indicating a lack of established adaptive behavioral patterns.

During the intervention stage, systematic work with the cards was implemented two to three times per week, combined with role-playing activities and practical exercises. This approach proved particularly effective in developing participants' social and moral skills. The visual representation of situations supported the overcoming of difficulties associated with abstract thinking, which is often limited among individuals with intellectual disabilities. Through the enactment of various real-life scenarios in a safe and supportive environment, participants were provided with opportunities to reflect on the consequences of different behavioral choices and to practice socially acceptable ways of responding.

The results of the evaluation stage demonstrated significant progress in the development of the targeted skills. A substantial increase in independence was observed, with 60% of participants being able to select the appropriate course of action independently in response to presented situations with closed-ended response options. A particularly important outcome was the improvement in participants' ability to recognize the consequences of their own actions. Although this indicator proved to be the most challenging to acquire, the proportion of participants demonstrating a low level of understanding decreased from 90% to 20%. By the end of the program, many participants were able, either independently or with minimal support, to justify their choices by identifying possible consequences for other people, for example: "If I keep the wallet, the person may be left without money and experience difficulties."

Significant development was also observed in the area of "personal responsibility," where 50% of participants progressed from complete dependence to partial independence, while 40% demonstrated a high level of social maturity. When addressing cases related to financial interactions, the predominant responses reflected honesty and responsibility, with participants most frequently stating that they would return any improperly received money because it did not belong to them. The obtained results confirm the effectiveness of the applied methods in developing skills related to moral judgment, social responsibility, and independent decision-making.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The obtained results confirm the significant role of targeted pedagogical interventions in the development of independence skills, personal responsibility, and socially adaptive behaviour among individuals with intellectual disabilities. The analysis of the observed positive dynamics across all examined criteria demonstrates that the implementation of structured pedagogical interventions based on visual materials, practical tasks, and role-playing activities creates an effective supportive environment for the formation and consolidation of socially appropriate behavioural patterns. These findings highlight the necessity of employing approaches that combine cognitive understanding with practical experience, as the acquisition of abstract concepts among individuals with intellectual disabilities often requires additional support through concrete examples and real-life situations. The observed changes indicate that the integration of practice-oriented activities facilitates not only the acquisition of specific skills but also the development of higher levels of awareness regarding one's own behaviour and its impact on others. Through the systematic presentation and discussion of various everyday situations, participants are provided with opportunities to analyse the causes and consequences of their actions, compare different behavioural alternatives, and gradually develop mechanisms for self-control and self-regulation. In this way, the pedagogical intervention becomes not merely a means of instruction but also a factor contributing to the development of personal autonomy and social inclusion.

Of particular significance is the progress demonstrated in the criteria "Awareness of Consequences" and "Personal Responsibility," where the highest levels of positive change were observed. These findings may be interpreted as evidence of the effectiveness of the applied methods in fostering causal reasoning and understanding the relationship between individual behaviour and its outcomes. The development of this ability is fundamental to the acquisition of social competence, as it enables individuals not only to comply with external rules and expectations but also to gradually understand their meaning and importance.

The systematic enactment of real-life or simulated situations through role-playing activities provides opportunities for active participation and practical rehearsal of desired behavioural responses. This approach reduces reliance on verbal instructions and facilitates the transfer of acquired knowledge to everyday life contexts. Within a safe and supportive environment, participants can repeatedly experiment with different solutions, receive feedback, and gradually develop confidence in independently managing challenging situations. This is particularly important for individuals with intellectual disabilities, for whom experiential learning and repetition are often essential conditions for the sustainable acquisition of new skills.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The obtained results support contemporary pedagogical understandings that experiential learning, active engagement, and individualized approaches represent some of the most appropriate strategies when working with individuals with intellectual disabilities. The effectiveness of such interventions is determined not only by the content of the educational process but also by the manner in which it is delivered—through accessible methods and resources tailored to learners' individual abilities, pace of acquisition, and specific needs. Within this context, the applied methodology demonstrates potential for supporting the process of social integration and enhancing quality of life through the development of practically applicable skills.

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