

People with intellectual disabilities in today's era: The improvement of the quality of their daily lives and expression and the role of ICTs

Pinelopi Christani *

Department of Greek Philology, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece.

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Abstract

Researchers from all fields have been engaged in dealing with the phenomenon of disabilities and its handling by the societal and policy forms. As a multidimensional and complex phenomenon, it lends itself to many interpretations and approaches, depending on the perspective from which the research is conducted. From a humanitarian perspective, systematic efforts have been made to improve the lives, particularly the psychological and social well-being, of individuals with disabilities to the greatest extent possible. Similarly, the treatment of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the social context, which is the focus of this paper, is no different. Through a historical review of the phenomenon, one can perceive that the position and care of individuals with disabilities, both by society and institutions, and how it has changed significantly over time.

Keywords: Intellectual disability; Well-being; Marginalization; Normalization; Inclusion

1. Introduction

Within scientific circles, it is widely accepted that this change has occurred with the aim of improving the daily lives of individuals with disabilities and achieving their social and personal well-being. However, the extent to which this has been achieved in comparison to the past, as well as how the treatment of impaired individuals in general, and individuals with intellectual impairments in particular, has taken different paths, is the focus of this work. To make this feasible, the four key stages in the history of intellectual disability and its treatment by society, are analyzed and interpreted. These stages are, namely, marginalization, normalization, integration, and inclusion during their respective historical periods. Furthermore, it is examined to what extent the prevailing perception of each society has had a positive or negative impact on the quality of life of individuals, concerning the existing references. In order to facilitate the above analysis, it is considered appropriate to present both the concept of intellectual disability and well-being, as the ultimate goal of programs aimed at individuals with disabilities.

2. Main Part

2.1. Definitions - basic terminology

The study of intellectual disability has engaged specialists extensively, who have attempted to thoroughly investigate both the causes and symptoms of individuals with intellectual disabilities. It is observed that through the study of the relevant literature, the definition of intellectual disability is a crucial step in determining the intervention methods and planning the teaching intervention program. As observed in the article by Alexopoulos (n.d.), there is confusion regarding the definition of the disorder as a unified and concise term, as various terms have been proposed over time to describe limited intellectual abilities. These terms range from 'mental (intellectual) incapacity,' 'intellectual

* Corresponding author: Pinelopi Christani

impairment,' to 'intellectual disability,' which appears to be the most scientifically accepted. However, there is still a division in accepting the term 'intellectual disability' or 'intellectual impairment,' which the author interprets as a difference stemming from 'developmental theoretical approaches' of the phenomenon and 'non-developmental approaches' respectively (Alexopoulos, n.d.). As for the definition of intellectual disability, the American Association on Mental Retardation (1983) suggests that "intellectual disability refers to significantly below-average general intellectual functioning, accompanied by deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period" (Zantopoulos, 2015). In the contemporary era and after the publication of numerous studies on this phenomenon, the same Association adopts the term 'intellectual disability' (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, n.d.). Nevertheless, education, as a broader field, and special education in particular, focus on the approach of "acceptance of 'difference and deficiency'" (Alexopoulos, n.d.). For this reason, the term 'intellectual disability' is adopted.

The next term that requires clarification is the term "wellness." Wellness is a broad term with many dimensions. According to the World Health Organization, wellness is the state in which an individual achieves physical, mental, and social health. The National Wellness Institute, on the other hand, emphasizes that it is a conscious, self-directed, and evolving process to be achieved to the fullest possible extent. It is understood that beyond ensuring the physical well-being of individuals, the maximum mental and social outcomes are also to be achieved. The aim is, therefore, to understand to what extent the well-being of individuals with intellectual disabilities has improved in their daily lives compared to previous decades.

2.2. Confinement - Marginalization

It is evident from the historical overview that the treatment of individuals with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, was limited to their confinement in asylums until the early 20th century. The conditions within these asylums are described in detail by Goffman (1961), who attempted to document the situation as he experienced it through these institutions. At one point in his work, he compares these asylums to prisons, making it clear to perceive the role these institutions played in society, by specifically stating, "(t)hese institutions or asylums usually operated outside and beyond the web of the 'healthy' society for reasons of 'mental self-defense of the (healthy) rest'" (Stasinós, 2016). Describing the conditions under which intellectually disabled individuals lived, it becomes clear that they were under constant supervision and treated as weak, guilty, and accountable for their condition (Goffman, 1961). In the same article, it is mentioned that their only contact with the outside world was through the institution's staff, with whom they were not allowed to establish any social relationships, except with fellow inmates, and even then, they had to use a specific tone of voice.

In terms of employment, Goffman (1961) mentions opportunities for work within the asylum, with compensation at the level of cigarette smoke, the receiving of Christmas gifts from their families, or simply under the threat of physical punishment. Campbell (1971), conducting a similar study, observed that in some cases, personal freedoms were granted to residents, such as taking a bath without supervision or managing their own money (Balla, 1976). From all the available records, it is concluded that individuals with intellectual disabilities faced inhumane conditions without any opportunity for development, work, or social relationships, deprived of all kinds of freedom within these institutions. This reflects the ideology of the entire society towards these individuals, suggesting that individuals with disabilities were considered an aberration within an otherwise flawless society, reinforcing the idea that people with disabilities were a stain on the otherwise perfect whole of society.

2.3. From Institutionalization to Integration

Over time and due to significant social and political developments, it became evident that institutionalizing such a large number of individuals was detrimental to society and the economy. Gradually, deinstitutionalization of these individuals began, and specialized care, which was not associated with isolation, was provided. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community and Social Services, along with local community-based foster homes, took full responsibility for the care of individuals with intellectual disabilities. At the same time, the first non-systematic efforts to establish diagnostic centers were mentioned (Welch, 1973). Regarding the employment of these individuals, they are still in a disadvantageous position because they are employed in limited positions with salaries below the minimum wage thresholds (Welch, 1973). Even at this stage of deinstitutionalization, there does not seem to be any mention of educational opportunities for these individuals, as it is believed that they would cause delays for the 'normal' students (Bouzakis & Berdousi, 2000).

At this point in history and normalization, the prevailing perception is that individuals with intellectual disabilities can return to the communities of the 'healthy' population, having a closer relationship with their family environment, provided with limited opportunities for employment and basic education schemes. According to Kisanji (1999),

normalization in an educational context means using the existing educational system with minimal additions of separate facilities. Therefore, the researcher argues that through normalization, the ideology of integrating individuals with intellectual disabilities into society emerged (Kisanji, 1999). Integration, as an early effort in the post-war decades to improve the lives of previously excluded populations, can be justified when considering the socio-economic conditions of the -this time period in Europe, with a pressing need for reconstruction and an active workforce.

Thus, the European Union began to enact laws regarding the employment of people with disabilities, taking into account "population aging rates, longer life expectancy, and the resulting economic consequences for the public finances of countries" (Diadromes Isotitas, 2007). Specifically, the Labor Inspectorate (S.E.P.E.) in 1996, in accordance with the existing law, was called upon to impose measures in workplaces to meet the needs of workers with disabilities and facilitate their access to employment. This followed the European practices of absorbing both people with disabilities and intellectual disabilities into the workforce, opening pathways for personal development and the formation of personal identity to those individuals.

From the educational perspective, integration takes the form of three dimensions; spatial, social and functional (Stasinou, 2016). According to the spatial dimension, children with disabilities, including intellectual ones, are housed in the same schools as typically developing children but in separate special education units. However, there is an effort to socialize these children, as they interact socially during breaks or in common leisure activities, which is referred to as social integration. Finally, in the functional form of integration, all students have equal roles in the regular classroom. However, it seems that the opportunities for individuals with disabilities in tertiary education are still limited or 'by exception' (Zachos, n.d.), as there is a lack of accessibility and infrastructure.

2.4. From integration to inclusion

The main disadvantage of integration on an educational level is that it "refers to the assimilation model and the loss of diversity (normalization)" (Karkoutas, 2008). In her article, Markantoni (2016) points out that "inclusion means the complete assimilation of the individual into the group and the adoption of its cultural norms" (Zoniou-Sideri, 1998, as cited in Markantoni, n.d.). Therefore, in the modern era, there is an effort to integrate individuals into the social framework showing respect for diversity and their personality. At the primary level, this is achieved through education and the adoption of holistic methods and tactics. In practice, this means co-teaching all students in the same structures, with adjustments to the curriculum to meet the needs of all learning profiles. Besides the opportunities for education and social development, schools provide opportunities for the full socialization of children with special needs, while also cultivating a sense of respect for diversity through various awareness-raising activities "to help students develop collaborative relationships and meaningful communication" with the ultimate goal of "developing empathy and cultivating respect for people with special needs and abilities" (Republic and Education, n.d.). Additionally, systematic efforts are made by government agencies to inform the public, both about the "rules of everyday communication behavior with people with disabilities" (General Secretariat for Communication - General Secretariat for Information, 2008) and to ensure "the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities and to promote respect for their dignity" (United Nations, 2007, as cited in the Cyprus Tourism Organization, n.d.).

3. The role of ICTs

Finally, we emphasize the significance of all digital technologies in the field of education and in intellectual disabilities training, which is highly effective and productive and facilitates and improves assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [17-20], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [21-37], and AI, STEM, Games and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levers [38-45]. Additionally, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence [46-71], accelerates and improves more than educational practices and results, especially intellectual disabilities, treating domain and its practices like assessment and intervention.

4. Conclusion

Through the brief historical overview attempted in this paper, it becomes clear that individuals with intellectual disabilities overall enjoy better treatment than in previous decades. Specifically, they are in a more advantageous position, have the opportunity to receive education with state care, to work, and to socialize adequately, since the concept of holistic education with the co-teaching of all students in recent decades has been promoted. Consequently, individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to educate themselves and discover inclinations, preferences, and

interests, and thus, to shape their personal identity. Finally, there is a tendency on the part of the government to absorb these individuals into positions that match their abilities. It should be noted that special emphasis is placed on cultivating a sense of acceptance and inclusion, both through schools and society in general, to eliminate prejudices and stereotypes. This entire process aims at the full integration of individuals with disabilities and deficits into the functions of society and the opportunity for their recognition as personalities and characters who are not inferior in any way to the rest of the social body. Although this is an ongoing process that requires time and effort, significant progress has been made in recent decades in the welfare of individuals with disabilities of all levels. There is still much room for improvement and acceptance of this specific population, and change can come through education, with proper information and the cultivation of a sense of empathy among the student population

Compliance with ethical standards

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