

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

Anna SUCHON

Jan Dlugosz University in Czestochowa; a.suchon@ujd.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-9630-8848

Objective: The objective of this article is to organize the knowledge regarding disability and to initiate a discussion on the necessary changes in societal perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities, with the aim of preparing them for self-determination.

Approach: In the text, I refer to my own research conducted during my doctoral studies. The research consisted of the following stages: preliminary studies: Assessing the level of skills, primarily in the area of independence (research tools used: PAC - H.C. Gunzburg's Progress Assessment Chart for evaluating social development in individuals with intellectual disabilities, HKI - Heidelberger Kompetenz-Inventar for individuals with intellectual disabilities); analysis of the causes of observed differences (research tool: questionnaire); pedagogical experiment lasting 4 years: Conducted with an experimental group and a control group. Both groups were assessed every 6 months (research tools used: PAC - H.C. Gunzburg's Progress Assessment Chart for evaluating social development in individuals with intellectual disabilities, HKI - Heidelberger Kompetenz-Inventar for individuals with intellectual disabilities). Follow-up study conducted 6 years after the experiment (research tools used: PAC - H.C. Gunzburg's Progress Assessment Chart for evaluating social development in individuals with intellectual disabilities, HKI - Heidelberger Kompetenz-Inventar for individuals with intellectual disabilities).

Findings: I would like to demonstrate that by providing students with appropriate and, importantly, practical opportunities to learn certain skills, they are capable of learning much more.

Practical implications: As changes in a developing society occur more and more rapidly, it is necessary to constantly update the methods of working and educating people with disabilities to prepare them to function independently.

Originality/value: The concept of an individual with an intellectual disability deviates from commonly applied standards. Many people perceive such individuals only as recipients of help and support. However, it is essential to remember that they are also members of the community, with associated duties, mandates, and prohibitions.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities, employment, society.

Category of the paper: Viewpoint, general review.

1. Introduction

Money as a Means of Payment was invented by the Phoenicians around 1000 B.C.

For centuries, money has fulfilled its purpose, initially being used in exchange for tangible goods (food, clothing, etc.) and later for more abstract items (stocks, savings). It might seem that contemporary society uses and handles money effortlessly and without difficulty. With a credit card in your pocket—which, it should be noted, is itself becoming obsolete in favor of smartphones and other similar gadgets—one might believe that we have full control over our finances. At any moment, we can check our account balance, savings, expenses, and so forth. Society 5.0 seeks to meet these demands by fully integrating the latest technologies into people's daily lives, aiming to improve the functioning of society, the economy, and the environment. I believe that the vast majority of people utilize these capabilities in this way.

However, what about those who, for various reasons, are unable to master technology? In my discussion, I would like to focus on individuals with intellectual disabilities. For these individuals, adaptive functioning does not proceed as it should; they face difficulties in understanding abstract concepts, and the notion of money and its purchasing power is not fully comprehended by them.

Intellectual disability is classified based on the severity of symptoms and intellectual and adaptive functioning. To organize my discussion, I would like to briefly describe the existing levels.

Mild intellectual disability: Individuals with mild intellectual disabilities may have learning difficulties but typically achieve an educational level equivalent to the end of elementary school. They often require support with complex tasks such as managing finances or career planning, but they are generally capable of leading relatively independent lives. They frequently work in simple jobs that require minimal skills. I would like to emphasize that with proper training, they are capable of using money safely and effectively. **Moderate intellectual disability:** Individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities have limited academic learning abilities and may achieve an educational level similar to the early grades of elementary school. They require support in daily life, both in self-care and social interactions. They may perform simple tasks under supervision.

Severe intellectual disability: Individuals with this level of disability have significant learning difficulties, often limited to the most basic skills, such as recognizing letters and numbers. They require constant assistance with daily activities, such as eating, dressing, and personal hygiene. Their ability to communicate independently is limited.

Profound intellectual disability: Individuals with profound intellectual disabilities have very limited cognitive and communication abilities. Their mental development is comparable to that of a very young child. They often have serious health and physical issues that further complicate their functioning.

In this article, I will focus solely on the first and second levels of intellectual disability.

2. Benefits

In Poland, individuals with disabilities face various financial challenges, most often related to their health condition and the various limitations that arise from it (such as the inability to plan due to potential disease relapse, additional injuries, or even "ordinary" colds). It is also important to remember that these individuals generally have lower immunity, which is especially dangerous and potentially life-threatening in the event of subsequent COVID-19 outbreaks.

Individuals with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, can rely on the following forms of financial support:

Social benefits (pensions, care allowances, rehabilitation supplements, caregiver allowances)

Employment – either in the open labor market with the help of an assistant or in sheltered employment conditions

Various support programs (partial reimbursement of medical treatment costs, purchase of medications, home adaptations, or vehicle modifications).

Support from organizations: They can also receive assistance from organizations, associations, and foundations whose charters include the provision of such support.

Tax relief: They are also entitled to tax deductions.

Aside from individual circumstances (such as when the parents of a person with a disability are very well-off, or conversely, are forced to rely on social assistance), the average family of a person with a disability tends to be lower-functioning financially. This is primarily due to the need for one parent to give up their professional career to care for the child.

In the years 2007-2017, I conducted research among 200 families with children with intellectual disabilities. In the controlled shares of 100 families whose children attend special schools in Gliwice and Bytom (Poland), and 100 families whose children attend appropriate schools in Bernkastel-Kues and Cochem (Germany). For an individual with an intellectual disability (in my discussion, I focus only on mild and moderate levels) to understand such abstract concepts as money, its purchasing power, saving, interest, etc., they require systematic training. Mastering the use of a payment card or mobile app also depends on frequent use of technology. Initially, this should be done under the supervision of parents or teachers, but eventually, the individual should be able to do it independently.

It is difficult to provide such training when the family's financial situation is challenging. This is understandable, given that many families need to plan their expenses very carefully. I understand the concerns and reluctance of parents to allow their children to use money independently.

The school is not always able to meet this challenge either. When analyzing the Polish teaching guide, I noticed that taking students to the store is recommended only four times, and the student's role is always limited to "assisting the teacher during shopping".

In contrast, during the same period, students with a comparable level of intellectual disability in the German education system went shopping once a week as part of their school activities.

The shopping trips were integrated into preparing lunch for the group. The students' tasks included:

- Deciding what they would cook,
- Checking promotional flyers to ensure they had enough money,
- Making a shopping list,
- Going to the store,
- Finding items on the shelves,
- Paying at the checkout, and
- Returning to the school.

I would like to emphasize that even the most advanced technology cannot replace the type of training that equips individuals with the skills necessary for independent functioning. Learning to recognize fraudulent offers—such as scams or taking out loans with unreasonable interest rates, etc.—is crucial. Work on these skills should begin as early as possible, ideally in the younger school years, and should be continued after school through training, workshops, or participation in projects.

In analyzing the research I conducted, I observed that students in the experimental group achieved a higher level of competencies than the control group. Unfortunately, the highest level of skills was observed at the end of their schooling. However, there was a systematic decline in competencies afterward. Despite their skills, none of the students were able to maintain employment. Social interaction increasingly became limited to their own rooms, and new acquaintances ceased to appear (with the remaining family growing older). Even in cases where there were no articulation issues, a decline in communication competencies could be observed.

The German peer developed relatively steadily, was employed, lived independently or in care homes, and led an active social life. He often had a partner.

The subjects covered during the 12 years of schooling in the German system include:

- Scope of Work and Vocational Training:
 - The range of work and vocational education.
- Scope of Aesthetics:
 - Fundamentals of aesthetic development.
 - Music, dance, rhythm.
 - Drama, play, theater.
 - Visual arts.
 - Beauty of nature.

- Scope of Leisure and Personal Life Creation:
 - Leisure time.
 - Openness to others, readiness to engage.
 - Housing.
 - Partnerships.
- Scope of Domestic Activities:
 - Basic skills in handling food.
 - Basic “hygienic” and care skills.
 - Basic knowledge needed for managing a household.
- Scope of “Self and Others”:
 - Development of self-awareness (Sexual life).
- Scope of Communication:
 - Readiness for communication, components of communication.
 - Symbolism.
 - Eye contact, facial expressions, body language.
 - Verbal speech.
 - Sign language, facilitated communication, "computer-based" communication.
 - Foreign languages.
 - Reading.
 - Writing.
- Scope of Sports, Movement, Games, and Activities:
 - Body awareness, signals from one’s own body.
 - Orientation in indoor and outdoor spaces.
 - Effort and rest.
 - Water activities, swimming.
 - Games and sports competitions.
 - Sports and movement games.
 - Athletics – running, jumping, throwing.
 - Competitions and artistic gymnastics.
 - School sports offerings related to leisure time.
- Scope of Respect for Public Goods:
 - Concepts of numbers, sizes, money, and time.
 - Nature and ecology.
 - Technology and DIY.
 - Public services and institutions.

3. Employment

Preparation for work begins during schooling. Each year, the number of internships and interactions with workplaces increases. Referring to my research, I would like to note that in Germany, all individuals with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities were engaged in professional work upon reaching the required age. Of course, the scope of their tasks was fully adapted to their abilities. I observed workplaces such as those producing license plates, packaging components (e.g., shower cabins), printing and sorting materials (e.g., car manuals), and a specialized company that professionally destroyed documents. It is worth noting that in these facilities, the margin of error was 0.2%, exactly the same as in other facilities employing fully abled workers. The exception was the document destruction company, where the margin of error was "0" – just like in any such firm. Therefore, it can be said that products made by individuals with disabilities must be "just as good" as those from other facilities.

Topics related to work and vocational training discussed in German schools include:

- Basics of work and production.
- Acquisition of general practical skills.
- Understanding the relationship between work and the economy.
- Developing a personal attitude towards work.
- Addressing inappropriate behavior towards other colleagues.
- Coping with work difficulties (problem-solving).
- Participating in creating workplace safety, adhering to health and safety regulations.
- Forms of work and production.
- Independent and group work.
- Preparation of individual components.
- Creating products from components (assembly).
- Participation in preparing semi-finished products.
- Working with machines.
- Operating computers and computerized machines.
- Planning, preparing, and selling from an economic perspective.
- Working with wood.
- Working with metal.
- Working with textiles.
- Working with leather.
- Working with paper.
- Restaurant work (renovation, restoration).
- Gardening.
- Working with clay.

- Industrial work – assembly and installation.
- Sorting, packaging, and shipping.
- Preparation and completion of vocational training.

Data from the Central Statistical Office, approximately 2.3 million people with the exclusion of having no criminal record, the amount of incapacity or average incapacity for work are included in the ZUS files. In the examined category of people with the exclusion of disability, the amount of incapacity or the amount of incapacity for work, which constitute 51.1%. Most of them were men aged 64 (50.5 thousand), while women were aged 73 (31.8 thousand). The median age of men is 62 years, and the median age of women is 64 years.

In Poland, the employment system is highly varied. Often, individuals are employed for three months (during which there are discounts for hiring such employees). It is quite common for people to work without a formal contract and receive reduced wages. Their monthly income typically does not allow for independent living and self-sufficiency. There are prevailing concerns that the actual costs associated with employing individuals with intellectual disabilities (such as damaged equipment, goods, and the need for constant supervision for safety) result in losses rather than gains.

The most common form of employment offered to adults with intellectual disabilities is participation in Occupational Therapy Workshops. Once again, we are faced with a situation where the intentions are good, but the practice is not always effective. Even though workshop participants perform a variety of subjects, these workshops should be classified as hands-on therapy rather than actual paid employment. The workshops were created to prepare adults for the labor market, but research shows that they do not fulfill this task.

According to expectations, a graduate of a special primary school for students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities should be able to:

- Communicate with their immediate surroundings.
- Listen to and follow simple instructions.
- Understand the layout of their own body.
- Signal and manage physiological needs.
- Maintain personal hygiene.
- Wipe their nose with a tissue.
- Comb their hair.
- Dress and undress independently, adjust clothing to weather conditions, prepare a simple meal on their own—set the table, make a sandwich, clean up, eat in an aesthetically pleasing manner using utensils.
- Function well in a group.
- Establish and maintain appropriate social contacts.
- Handle new situations.

- Spend free time in a culturally acceptable and generally accepted manner.
- Behave appropriately in public places.
- Move around their immediate and broader surroundings while ensuring safety.
- Know their own name, surname, age, and address.

The analysis of this program indicates that the focus is primarily on self-care, personal hygiene, and safety. Functioning within the child's surrounding world is limited to motor skills and sensory integration. Social competencies (such as waiting their turn, accepting criticism, losing in group interactions) are insufficiently emphasized. There is a noticeable tendency toward vague and general descriptions, which can lead to superficial or impoverished implementation.

I would also like to share my own reflection here. An individual with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities who is only, or mainly, trained in basic hygiene activities is, in my view, being prepared for the role of a resident in a social care facility, rather than for self-determination. One might wonder if the graduate will possess sufficient skills to, given current changes in the perception of the place of individuals with intellectual disabilities in society, take an appropriate role in it. A socially expected graduate is someone who can take control of their life and interact with others. They might need assistance from a personal assistant or family assistant but will be capable of making decisions and facing their consequences.

4. Support Organizations

Fortunately, both countries have numerous organizations supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities. These include local and national associations and foundations, as well as state, religious, and private entities. Some focus on supporting parents, others on children, and yet others on adults with intellectual disabilities. I have analyzed several organization statutes and can confirm that financial training is often conducted through the implementation of EU projects. Many organizations employ dedicated staff whose role is to secure funding by writing proposals specifically targeted at supporting people with disabilities.

5. Incapacity

I would also like to highlight that, as a country, we are "catching up" with certain European solutions aimed at individuals with intellectual disabilities.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by individual countries in 1948, and Poland joined this group in 1993.

The European Social Charter was signed in 1961, but Poland did so only in 1991/1997.

The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities were recognized by all parties in 1993.

The Madrid Declaration was also adopted in 2002.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified by Poland only a year later than other countries, in 2007.

In general terms, the documents can be summarized as follows:

- Nothing about disabled people without disabled people.
- People with disabilities seek equal opportunities, not pity.
- Creating a society for all.
- Creating an accessible environment.
- Full equality and participation in all areas of life.
- Independent living.
- Respect for diversity.
- People with disabilities as active citizens.

However, in Poland, there is a troubling trend of abuse regarding the use of legal incapacitation. Parents and guardians often claim that it is for the benefit of the person concerned, but I personally have some doubts.

Incapacity is a legal tool used in situations where a person, due to mental illness, intellectual disability, or other psychological disorders, is unable to direct their actions and make decisions independently in a conscious and responsible manner. The purpose of incapacity is to protect the interests of such a person, as well as to safeguard society from potentially harmful actions by that person. There are two types of incapacity: full and partial.

Full Incapacity: This applies to individuals who, due to mental illness, intellectual disability, or other psychological disorders, are unable to direct their actions at all. **Legal Consequences:** A person with full incapacity loses the ability to perform legal acts, meaning they cannot independently enter into contracts, manage their property, or make legal decisions. A legal guardian, appointed by the court, acts on their behalf.

Partial Incapacity: This applies to individuals who, due to the aforementioned reasons, are able to direct their actions only to a limited extent. **Legal Consequences:** A person with partial incapacity has restricted legal capacity. They can make decisions in simple daily matters independently but need the consent of a court-appointed guardian for more significant issues.

The process of declaring incapacity is relatively straightforward. An application must be submitted, and the court reviewing the application conducts evidentiary proceedings, including appointing experts who assess the psychological condition of the person in question. The person has the right to be heard, unless their health condition prevents it. Based on the collected evidence, the court issues a ruling on full or partial incapacity or dismisses the application if it deems incapacity unnecessary.

Application and Controversies: While incapacity aims to protect individuals who are unable to act independently, it also raises controversies due to the restriction of freedom and rights of the incapacitated person. Therefore, decisions regarding its application must be made cautiously, with full respect for human rights and consideration of the best interests of the person concerned.

The theory related to incapacity suggests a fully professional approach to the matter. One must not forget that it is about protecting individuals with disabilities. However, research conducted by PSOOU (Polish Association for People with Intellectual Disabilities) more than twenty years ago revealed that, out of 400 cases of incapacity:

- 98% were ruled based on a single contact.
- 91% were declared as full incapacity regardless of the degree of disability (including mild cases).

Despite everything, one must hope that changes in the social living standards will gain appropriate momentum and maintain the right direction.

6. Conclusion

The educational offer for students with intellectual disabilities should be significantly expanded to include content related to vocational preparation.

Maintain systematic opportunities for further education or training for adults with intellectual disabilities. There should be increased activity in raising awareness of employers and cooperation with local workplaces. Promote examples of local "Good Practices".

References

1. Agran, M. (2009). *Teachers perception of self-determinatio: Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, pp. 293-301.
2. Antor, G. (2010). Helfen, Hilfe. In: G. Antor, Bleidick (ed.), *Handlexikon der Behindertenpädagogik Kohlhammer* (pp. 37-39). Stuttgart.
3. Baczała, D. (2012). *Niepełnosprawność intelektualna a kompetencje społeczne*. Toruń: UMK.
4. Czołgała, M. (2020). *Sytuacja życiowa osób niepełnosprawnych*, www.stat.gov.pl, 1.10.2020.
5. Gajdzica, Z. (2007). *Edukacyjne konteksty bezradności społecznej osób z lekkim upośledzeniem umysłowym*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.

6. Głaz, M. (2007). Pozytywne doświadczenia z zatrudnienia osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną na otwartym rynku. *Aktywizacja osób niepełnosprawnych*, no. 4(12), pp. 269-279.
7. Holtz, K., Eberle, G., Hillig, A., Marker, K. (1998). *HKI Heidelberger Kompetenz-Inventar für geistig Behinderte*. Heidelberg.
8. Korzon, A. (2006). Edukacja niepełnosprawnych warunkiem wyrównywania ich szans w zjednoczonej Europie. In: Cz. Kosakowski, A. Krause, S. Przybyliński (ed.), *Pomiędzy teorią a praktyką* (pp. 251-256). Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko Mazurskiego.
9. Kruk-Lasocka, J. (2013). *W drodze do samostanowienia osób z głębszą niepełnosprawnością intelektualną*. Katowice: STAPIS.
10. Kruk-Lasocka, J., Suchon, A. (2016). Der Platz von Menschen mit maBiger geistiger Behinderung in der polnischen Sesellschaft. In: *Respekt – Relevanz – Ressourcen* (pp. 1-19). Weimar: Sonderpadagogischer Kongres.
11. Raport “Inclusion Europe”, http://self-advocacy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Annual-Report-2016_final.pdf, 22.02.2017.