From the Founding of the State to Today:

Experiences of People with Physical Disabilities during their School Years

**Research Topic**

The proposed study seeks to explore a particularly significant period in the lives of people with disabilities—the phase in which they are part of the education system. It aims to reveal the stigma, hatred and intolerance experienced by children and adolescents with disabilities in the course of their school years; to examine the context of these experiences within the education system; and to ask whether the nature of these experiences has changed over the years. Finally, these observations will serve as a foundation for a proposed plan of action for the education system to counter intolerance towards children and adolescents with disabilities.

**Theoretical background**

Throughout most of history, the phenomenon of disability had been explained as essentially a medical phenomenon. Since the early 1970s, however, novel approaches have re-interpretated disability by focusing on the social aspects of the phenomenon, in terms of origins and consequences (Finkelstein and French, 1993; Oliver, 1990). The academic discipline of Disability Studies, which delves in depth into the phenomenon of disability, and includes a wide range of interpretations of the phenomenon. Within the framework of this field, a number of models have been put forth that offer an alternative interpretation of disability, including repositioning it as a social phenomenon and not (or not exclusively) as a medical one (Oliver, 1990; Abberley, 1997). Two main models of this nature are the social model and the minority group model. The social model maintains that the social environment, with its economic, geographical and psychological characteristics, is the cause that generates disability (Oliver, 1990; Finkelstein, 1981; Pena, Stapleton & Schaffer, 2016). This model challenges the traditional perception of disability as an individual matter, and as a defect emerging from a given medical condition (physical, emotional/psychological or mental/intellectual). It suggests, instead, that disability is fundamentally socially constructed and that it stems from technical and psychological barriers originating in society. The social model sees people with disabilities as an oppressed group; it offers an alternative view that comes from the perspective of people with disabilities themselves; and it sees disabilities as a social construct rather than as a physical defect (Shakespeare, 2010). Within this framework, the social model seeks to propose policies and processes of accessibility that reduce social stigma and processes that prevent internalization of stigma (Morris, 1991).

The minority group model maintains that disability is a phenomenon based on the oppression of a minority group by another power group within society, and this oppression stems from the characteristics of difference associated with the minority group (Wertlieb, 1985, Barnes, 2016). People with disabilities, like other minority groups, frequently suffer from stigma, exclusion, and even hatred and violence. However, unlike other minority groups, negative perceptions about disabilities also stem from objective negative characteristics related to disabilities, characteristics whose origins cannot be explained by social barriers. Emphasis on these objective characteristics causes the formation of a distorted perception of the experience of disability, even more than in the case of other minority groups (Asch 1998 in Gill, p. 365). In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the different types of violence that people with disabilities experience. For example, many countries have expanded their legislation on hate crimes, which appye to crimes that target particular groups of people on account of their identity, so as to also include people with disabilities (Sin, 2015).

Only a minority of academic research applies these models to young people with disabilities. Most studies in the field that seek to examine the situation of children and adolescents deal with the integration of children with disabilities in schools. Some describe social rejection from which these children suffer and some reflect the negative prejudices of teaching staff. Most of these studies examine the success or failure of the integration from the perspective of teachers or parents of children with disabilities. However, it is rare to find studies that focus on the experiences of children and adolescents from their own self-perspective (Broomhead, 2019; Odom, Farmer et al, 2018; Marquart, Sandall, & Brown, 2006).)

**Research program and methodology**

The proposed research is based on an innovative combination of the “life history approach” and an interpretive approach that deals with the here and now. The combination of these approaches is not common in the field of disability studies in general and in the Israeli field in particular.

The first part of the study will be based on 30 “life history” interviews with people with physical and motor disabilities (people who have had difficulty with walking or mobility since childhood). The participants, across three generations, were educated in the Israeli education system between the 1940s and the 1990s. The interviews will help in understanding the barriers and difficulties they had to deal with during their school years and the impact of these experiences on their adult lives. The starting point of the study is that childhood years are formative and meaningful years and therefore experiences of exclusion and stigma, as well as experiences of success, can be expected to exert influence upon self-image in adulthood as well as on the development of strategies for coping with situations of exclusion and discrimination (Gross et al., 2019).

The second part of the study will be based on 10 in-depth interviews with another generation of people with motor disabilities: young people who have completed their studies in the last ten years. The interviews with this group will reveal the relevant issues for children with disabilities in the education system in recent years. The data will enable an examination of the changes that have taken place over the past decades in relation to changes in legislation (Special Education Law 1988; Law of Equal Rights for People with Disabilities 1998). These interviews will provide information about the extent to which laws for equal rights and views of inclusion in schools are being implemented.

This study is unique in that it seeks to give voice to people with disabilities and to afford them the opportunity to tell their story for themselves, in a perspective of time, and in a way that will enable the emergence of insights and reflection. Denouncing hatred and intolerance towards young people with disabilities and instilling a discourse of equal rights already at school age will facilitate the campaign to eliminate the negative phenomena experienced by people with disabilities even in adulthood.