

Socializing Persons with Disabilities: Tracing Changes-In-Time

Moono Muvombo¹, Daniel L. Mpolomoka², Davy Mainde³, Chanda Thelma Chansa⁴, Thiruppathi Marirajan⁵, Pelekelo P. Kabundula⁶

¹School of Education, Nkrumah University, Kabwe, Zambia

²School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Unicaf University Zambia,

³School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Zambian Open University,

⁴School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Chreso University, Lusaka, Zambia,

⁵Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research and Innovation, Unicaf University Zambia

* E-mail of the corresponding author: mpolomokadl@gmail.com

Abstract

This study focused on understanding the changes-in-time in socializing persons with disabilities whose main aim was to explore how social interactions and inclusion of persons with disabilities have evolved over the years. The probed the historical perspective of socializing persons with disabilities by examining the societal attitudes and policies towards individuals with disabilities in the past and how they have shaped the current landscape of socialization. The study also looked at how advancements in assistive technology have facilitated communication, networking, and social interaction for individuals with disabilities. This study investigated the barriers and challenges faced by persons with disabilities in socializing. It examines issues such as stigma, discrimination, lack of accessibility, and limited social opportunities that hinder their participation in social activities. The study also proposed recommendations for future research, intervention strategies, and policy changes to promote greater social inclusion and participation for individuals with disabilities.

Keyword: Socialization, Disability, Inclusion, Society, Policy

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1. Introduction

Socialising persons with disabilities has been a topic of interest and concern for researchers, policymakers, and advocates for many years. The way in which individuals with disabilities are included in social activities and interactions has evolved over time, reflecting changes in societal attitudes, policies, and practices. It is importance to delve in historical development of persons with disabilities and see where we are.

Historically, persons with disabilities have often been marginalized and excluded from mainstream social activities. According to Apgar (2001), PWD were often segregated in institutions or special schools, and were not given the same opportunities to participate in community life as their non-disabled peers. This exclusion was based on the belief that individuals with disabilities were somehow less capable or deserving of social inclusion.

However, over the past few decades, there has been a significant shift in how persons with disabilities are viewed and treated in society. This change has been driven by a number of factors, including the disability rights movement, changes in legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, and a growing recognition of the value of diversity and inclusion (Uromi and Mazagwa, 2014). As a result of these changes, there has been a greater emphasis on socialising persons with disabilities and ensuring that they have the same opportunities to participate in social activities as everyone else. This includes efforts to promote inclusive education, community-based living, and access to recreational and cultural activities.

Research on socialising persons with disabilities has also evolved over time, reflecting these changes in societal attitudes and practices. Uromi and Mazagwa's (2014) study suggest that early research focused on the barriers to social inclusion faced by individuals with disabilities, such as discrimination, lack of accessibility, and negative attitudes. More recent research has shifted towards examining the factors that promote social inclusion and participation, such as social support, self-advocacy, and inclusive policies and practices.

Overall, the research on socialising persons with disabilities has shown that social inclusion is not only a matter of rights and justice, but also has important benefits for individuals with disabilities, such as improved self-esteem, social skills, and quality of life. By tracing the changes in how persons with disabilities are socialised over time, this study can gain valuable insights into the factors that promote social inclusion and identify areas for further improvement. By promoting social inclusion and participation for individuals with disabilities, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

Objectives

Socializing persons with disabilities is an important aspect of ensuring their inclusion and equality in society. As attitudes and perceptions towards people with disabilities have evolved over time, it is crucial to examine how socialization practices have changed and continue to change. By tracing the change-in-time in how persons with disabilities are socialized, we can gain a deeper understanding of the progress that has been made and identify areas for further improvement. In order to have a comprehensive study, the following objectives;

1. To examine historical socialization practices towards persons with disabilities.
2. To explore current socialization practices towards persons with disabilities.
3. To investigate emerging trends in socializing persons with disabilities.

2. The Concept of Socialization

Kendall (2008) defines socialization as a process in which an individual accepts a given set of cultural norms and becomes a member of a given society. It is a lifelong process where citizens interact in learning beliefs, skills, standards, norms and habits which are a key in community's participation. One is not born with these traits, instead they learn them as they begin interacting with other members in the surrounding. This style of learning where children are transformed from natural persons to civilized individuals is what constitutes socialization. This means that every community has unique traits from others. This learning is not limited to one's childhood, instead it is a lifelong social interaction process.

Socialization is an active process of learning and social development, which occurs as we interact with one another and become acquainted with the social world in which we live. It involves the formation of ideas about who we are and what is important in our lives. We are not simply passive learners in the socialization process. Socialization is an interactive process through which we actively connect with others, synthesize information, and make decisions that shape our own lives and the social world around us (Ruddell & Shinew, 2006). We actively participate in our socialization as we influence those who influence us. We actively interpret what we see and hear, and we accept, resist, or revise the messages we receive about who we are, about the world, and about what we should do as we make our way in the world.

3. Socialization vs. Persons with Disabilities

The socialization of people with disabilities has been a topic of interest and research over the years, with various studies and personal narratives shedding light on the challenges and changes experienced by individuals with disabilities in their social lives. The history and current trends regarding people with disabilities reveal a shift from exclusion and dependence to civil rights and accommodations, universal design and diversity, and self-determination and independence. This evolution in societal attitudes and policies has contributed to the changing landscape of disability culture and the socialization of people with disabilities (Durstin, et al, 2000). In recent years, disability culture has been changing, with disabled people becoming more confident, self-assured, realistic, and conscious of barriers. The disability community is undergoing a transition, moving towards a more unified approach to disability rights and justice, with a focus on the common experience of disability and the need for new social structures that cater to enriching the human experience for all.

Historically, individuals with disabilities often faced social exclusion, discrimination, and limited opportunities for engagement. However, concerted efforts to promote inclusivity and equality have led to notable changes in how society interacts with and accommodates people with disabilities. Coakley (2004) noted that one crucial aspect of the evolution in socialization is the shift from institutionalization to community integration. In the past, many individuals with disabilities were confined to institutions and isolated from mainstream society. This segregation not only deprived them of social connections but also perpetuated stigmas surrounding disability. Over time, there has been a movement towards deinstitutionalization, emphasizing community-based support services and independent living arrangements. This shift has facilitated greater social interaction and inclusion for people with disabilities, allowing them to participate more fully in society.

Legislation has played a pivotal role in advancing the rights of individuals with disabilities and fostering socialization. Laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) globally have mandated accessibility, accommodations and prohibited discrimination based on disability. These legal frameworks have helped break down barriers to social participation by requiring accessible environments, transportation, and communication, thus enabling individuals with disabilities to engage more fully in social activities.

Technological advancements have also had a profound impact on socialization for persons with disabilities. Assistive technologies, such as screen readers, text-to-speech software, and mobility aids, have empowered

individuals with disabilities to communicate, access information, and navigate their environments more independently. Moreover, the proliferation of social media platforms and online communities has provided new avenues for connecting and engaging with others, reducing the social isolation often experienced by people with disabilities. Social media is a collective term for websites and applications focusing on communication, community-based input, interaction, content-sharing, and collaboration. Chanda et al (2023) narrates that people use social media to stay in touch and interact with friends, family, and various communities.

Changing societal attitudes and increased awareness of diversity and inclusion have further contributed to the socialization of persons with disabilities. As pointed out by Chitondo & Chanda (2023), ethnic diversity is the existence of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds or identities. Efforts to promote disability awareness, sensitivity training, and inclusive education have helped foster a culture of acceptance and understanding. As a result, individuals with disabilities are increasingly seen as valued members of society, with their unique perspectives and contributions recognized and celebrated.

4. Challenges of PWB

Socializing for persons with disabilities on the other hand can present unique challenges compared to those without disabilities. While most social venues are designed with able-bodied individuals in mind, those with disabilities often encounter physical barriers such as steps, narrow doorways, or lack of ramps and elevators, which can limit their participation in social activities. Many infrastructure is not wheelchair accessible, making it difficult for persons with physical disabilities to move around freely. This lack of accessibility also extends to public transportation, making it challenging for persons with disabilities to travel independently.

Another challenge faced by persons with disabilities in Zambia is discrimination and stigmatization. Many individuals with disabilities are often treated differently or excluded from social activities due to their disabilities. This discrimination also extends to employment opportunities, with many persons with disabilities struggling to find meaningful work due to employers being unwilling to accommodate their needs. Individuals with disabilities may face prejudice or ignorance from others, which can impact their confidence and willingness to engage socially.

Downs & William (1994) adds that communication barriers also pose significant challenges. For those with hearing impairments, socializing can be difficult if accommodations such as sign language interpreters or captioning services are not provided. For instance, Joyce, et al (2016) highlights the reluctance amongst parents of autistic children to send their child to special institutions that are formulated with the sole purpose of aiding autistic children to attain the required educational knowledge. Similarly, individuals with speech impairments may face difficulties in expressing themselves, leading to frustration and isolation in social situations.

Additionally, persons with disabilities in Zambia often face barriers to accessing healthcare and education. Many healthcare facilities are not equipped to cater to the needs of persons with disabilities, leading to inadequate medical care. Medical expenses, assistive devices, and specialized transportation can strain finances, making it difficult for individuals with disabilities to afford social activities or participate in leisure pursuits that others take for granted. Similarly, children with disabilities are often excluded from mainstream education due to a lack of inclusive educational policies and facilities.

Despite these challenges, socialization remains essential for persons with disabilities. It fosters a sense of belonging, reduces feelings of isolation, and promotes mental and emotional well-being. Creating inclusive environments, offering support services, and raising awareness about disability issues are crucial steps toward ensuring that individuals with disabilities can fully participate in social life and enjoy meaningful connections with others.

Social media platforms such as, internet websites, email, and video games can expose children to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and privacy concerns (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Children with SEN may be particularly vulnerable to online risks due to factors such as limited digital literacy skills and difficulty discerning credible sources of information (Ferguson & Berry, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for parents, educators, and caregivers to provide guidance, supervision, and support for children with SEN in navigating the digital world safely and responsibly.

5. Agents of Socialization on Persons with Disabilities

According to McLeod (2018), agents of socialization refer to individuals, groups, institutions, or entities within society that play a significant role in the socialization process of individuals, contributing to the transmission of

cultural norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours from one generation to the next. Traditionally, these include: family, religious organisations, education, peer groups, and society (Perrino 2017). Each of these has specific role in helping new members acquire required skills, knowledge, norms, and habits to which the community believes in.

6. Traditional Agents of Socialization

Family

Primary socialization occurs during early childhood and involves the transmission of basic social skills and norms within the family context (Macionis, 2012). Family members serve as primary agents of socialization by providing emotional support, socialization, and role modeling for children. Through interactions with parents, siblings, and other family members, children learn language, social roles, and cultural practices, laying the foundation for their social development. The influence of the modern family in this process includes modification of mannerism, child's dress code, food provision, and habits of the children which have also impacted their education.

Miller (2017) stipulates that where any of the stages the individual does not develop the required capacity, there will be problems of varying degrees of severity later on. In the oral-sensory stage, a baby's first contacts are parents. Siti (2018) suggests that if parents can give the newborn a degree of familiarity, consistency, and continuity, then the child will develop the feeling that the social world is a safe place to be, and that people are reliable and loving.

Kalantari and Tavasoli (2005) examined the relationship between parenting styles and behavioural disorders in preschool children in the city. In families with hearing impaired children, parents are intimate with their children, which help in nurturing of these young ones (Odongo, 2018). A great importance on relations within the family is determined by the presence or absence of hearing in parents. It is ideal for parents to be directly involved in the education of disabled children. This is because knowledge and skills acquired by the children in school will endure and well controlled if they can also train them at home (Banda & Mpolomoka, 2016; Siti, 2018).

Education Institutions

As children grow older, secondary socialization occurs through participation in broader social institutions such as schools. Schools play a significant role in socializing children into the norms and values of society, providing opportunities for academic learning, social interaction, and the development of peer relationships (Macionis, 2012; McLeod, 2018).

The purpose of schooling is the transmission of culture through the process by which the culture of a society is passed on to its children (Saldana, 2013). Individuals learn their culture; acquire knowledge, beliefs, values, and norms. According to Siti (2018) the efforts to optimize the development of adolescents with special needs is none other than to provide education and training needed, both related to the ability of daily life, academic materials, and work skills. In this case, the process of education program for children with special needs emphasizes on the efforts to guide the students to be able to live their life independently. Schools are the agents responsible for socializing groups of children and young people on specific skills and values in a society (Henslin, 1999, in Saldana, 2013). In these races, children with special needs are not spared.

Education institutions need to provide inclusive classroom settings that promote positive peer interactions, mutual respect, and acceptance of individual differences, fostering a sense of belonging and social connectedness among children with SEN. According to Longmuir & Bar-Or (2000), inclusive classrooms embrace diversity, fostering an atmosphere where students of varying abilities, backgrounds, and identities interact regularly. Peer-mediated interventions and social skills training programs can enhance peer relationships and facilitate the inclusion of children with SEN in social activities and group settings. In line with the theory, therapists and other allied health professionals also contribute to the socialization of children with SEN by addressing underlying emotional, behavioral, or communication challenges that may impact their social functioning. Through individualized interventions, social skills training, and other strategies, they can help in enabling them to navigate social situations effectively and build meaningful relationships.

Additionally, inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for positive social interactions between students with and without disabilities. Through inclusive practices such as peer modeling and peer support, students learn to appreciate each other's strengths and offer assistance when needed, fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie among all learners (Zoerink, 1992). Furthermore, inclusive classrooms promote a culture of acceptance and celebration of diversity, challenging stereotypes and promoting social justice. By creating a safe

and inclusive environment where every student feels valued and respected, educators lay the foundation for a more equitable society.

Religious Organizations

The other influential traditional agent of socialization in the education of SEN children is a religious organisation. As a process of initiation into the larger society, religion is a veritable pivot of socialization where parental faith or religion becomes the faith of children (Okon, 2020). Religious education contributes dynamically to children and young people's education in schools by provoking challenging questions about meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human (Mpolomoka & Sakai, 2021; Chanda, et al, 2023). Children have limited choice, but to follow the beliefs of their parents.

Though some religious organizations are still maintaining status quo on socialization process, most modern society have changed this belief. Religious socialization is an interactive process within which various agents of socialization influence the development of the individual's religious convictions (Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi, 2019). Parental faith which supports the trust emerging in the new born has throughout history sought its institutional safeguard in organized religion. Okon (2020) argued that, religious rituals like weddings, child dedication, burials and birth day celebration promotes group solidarity and cohesion and identification with a particular religious group, gives the votaries a sense of belonging.

Peers

The peer groups also become increasingly influential during adolescence, as individuals seek acceptance, validation, and social identity through interactions with peers. These give an opportunity for children to form relationships with others on their own and learn things without the direction of an adult. A supportive relationship among students, teachers and family members are key elements of a caring and inclusive classroom environment. Literature informs us that disabled children live in different personal situations are more likely to experience higher levels of poverty, personal and social disadvantage than other children (Blackburn et al., 2010). A child may feel inferior if teachers are too harsh or peers are not accepting the condition. This may lead to stigmatization which according to Odongo (2018) may lead to persons with disabilities facing exclusion and dehumanizing treatment. Non-verbal communication and social interaction are seen as a key building block amongst pupils in a class, and the level of interaction during and outside the classroom seems to be critical toward the formation of friendship among children.

7. Modern Socializing Agents

Technology

Technology has become an increasingly important agent of socialization in modern society. Social media platforms, online communities, and video games can provide individuals with opportunities to interact with others, share ideas, and form relationships. Technology can also influence individuals' beliefs and behaviors by providing constant access to information and shaping their online identities.

Video games are part of technology and offer immersive and interactive experiences that can support the socialization and cognitive development of children with SEN. Certain video games incorporate elements of teamwork, problem-solving, and communication, providing opportunities for social interaction and skill-building (Granic, et. al., 2014). Moreover, video games can serve as a source of entertainment, relaxation, and stress relief for children with SEN, offering a safe and enjoyable outlet for self-expression and creativity.

Further, instagram, LinkedIn, internet websites, Gmail/Email, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter serve as important socializing agents for children with special education needs, offering opportunities for communication, learning, and social connection. Through these platforms, children can connect with mentors, educators, and professionals in their fields of interest, gaining insights, guidance, and support for their academic and career aspirations (Giang, 2019). While these platforms can enhance the social development and well-being of children with SEN, it is essential to address the potential risks and challenges associated with their use and provide support for safe and responsible digital citizenship.

Furthermore, Internet websites encompass a wide range of online resources and platforms that can support the socialization and learning needs of children with SEN. Educational websites, such as Khan Academy and PBS Kids, offer interactive learning activities, tutorials, and games that cater to diverse learning styles and abilities (Hsin & Cigas, 2013). Children with SEN can access educational content tailored to their individual needs, interests, and learning goals, enhancing their academic skills and knowledge acquisition.

In other agents of socialization in the modern world, Gmail/Email provides children with SEN with a means of

communication and information exchange, allowing them to connect with peers, teachers, and caregivers in a digital format. For example, email can be used for academic purposes, such as submitting assignments, asking questions, or seeking support from educators (Ferguson & Berry, 2019, Banda, Mpolomoka, Mbono & Sampa, 2017). Additionally, email enables children to maintain contact with friends and family members, thereby fostering social connections and reducing feelings of isolation. As a socializing agent, email/gmail plays a very big in introducing the children to some online interactions once they are oriented whether or without disabilities.

Media

In the modern world today, media and new technology has started replacing the traditional socialising agents. As suggested by Miller (2017), social media platforms such as Whatsaap, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have become increasingly prevalent in shaping the socialization experiences of children with special education needs (SEN). These platforms offer unique opportunities for communication, social interaction, and information sharing, which can have both positive and negative impacts on the social development of children with SEN.

Media, including television, social media, and the internet, is another powerful agent of socialization in modern society. Media exposes individuals to various cultural values, beliefs, and lifestyles, shaping their perceptions of the world (Arnett, 2015; Banda & Mpolomoka, 2018). Media can also influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors by presenting certain ideas as normal or desirable.

The media is one of the modern agents of socialization. The study by Mansour (2012) on Jordanian youth's use of the social media and its role in achieving their needs showed the increase in usage of social media and communication networks in Jordan. Mwangi, et al, (2019) study noted that mass media has great influence in the socialization of children with and without disabilities. Many parents in essence allow the television set to become a child's favourite 'playmate'. Evidence suggests that seeing aggressive behaviour on television may make some children more aggressive.

One significant benefit of social media platforms for children with SEN is the ability to connect with peers and access social support networks beyond their immediate physical environment today in various communities. According to Ferguson & Berry (2019), through platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, children with SEN can communicate with friends, family members, and support groups, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation. These platforms provide opportunities for social interaction, collaboration, and sharing of experiences, which can enhance social skills and self-esteem among children with SEN.

YouTube, in particular, offers a wealth of educational and informational content that can be beneficial for children with SEN. From instructional videos on academic subjects to tutorials on social skills and self-care, YouTube provides a diverse range of resources that cater to different learning styles and abilities (Miller, 2017). Children with SEN can access educational content at their own pace and in a format that suits their individual needs, empowering them to learn and develop new skills independently.

In Zambia today, the social media platforms can exacerbate feelings of social isolation and exclusion among children with SEN if they perceive themselves as unable to participate fully in online interactions or if they experience negative interactions with peers (Kalenga and Mukabila, 2019). For instance, cyberbullying, in particular, can have detrimental effects on the mental health and well-being of children with SEN, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Kowalski et al., 2014). As a result, it is very important for parents, educators, and caregivers to monitor and supervise children's online activities, provide guidance on digital citizenship, and foster open communication about online experiences and challenges (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Social media platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, internet websites, Gmail/Email, and video games play significant roles as socializing agents for children with special education needs (SEN), offering both opportunities and challenges in their social development. These platforms provide avenues for communication, interaction, and self-expression, allowing children with SEN to connect with peers, access information, and participate in virtual communities. Instagram, a photo and video-sharing platform, enables children with SEN to share their experiences, interests, and achievements with others in a visual format. Through Instagram, children can showcase their talents, hobbies, and creative endeavors, fostering self-confidence and self-expression (Baker, 2018). Additionally, Instagram provides opportunities for social connection and support, allowing children to connect with like-minded individuals and find communities that share their interests or experiences.

Sports

Sports as a tool for socialization for persons with disabilities have evolved over time, reflecting changes in societal attitudes and policies towards inclusion and accessibility. One key aspect of sports as a socialization agent for persons with disabilities is the sense of belonging and community it fosters (Howe and Jones, 2006). Through participation in sports, individuals with disabilities are able to connect with others who share similar challenges and experiences, providing a support network and sense of camaraderie. This helps them in the development of self-confidence and self-esteem.

Sports also play a pivotal role in breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions about disability. By showcasing the skills and talents of athletes with disabilities, sports challenge societal perceptions of what individuals with disabilities are capable of, promoting a more inclusive and accepting society. Devine and Garton (2015) argued that sports activities give opportunities to individuals with disabilities to have chance to interact with a wider range of people, breaking down barriers and promoting understanding and acceptance. There have also been changes in the attitudes towards disability in sports, with a greater emphasis on ability rather than limitations. This shift in perspective has helped to challenge stereotypes and promote a more positive image of individuals with disabilities in the sporting world.

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream sports has also increased, with initiatives such as the Paralympic Games showcasing the talents and abilities of athletes with disabilities on a global stage. This has helped to raise awareness and promote the idea that disability is not a barrier to achieving success in sports. Accessibility has also improved over time, with efforts being made to ensure that sports facilities and programs are more inclusive and accommodating to individuals with disabilities.

Changes in technology have also played a role in shaping sports for individuals with disabilities, with advancements in adaptive equipment and assistive technology making it easier for individuals with disabilities to participate in sports (Devine and Garton, 2015). This has led to greater innovation and creativity in the design of sports equipment and programs. Thus, as attitudes and policies towards disability continue to evolve, the role of sports in shaping the lives of individuals with disabilities will continue to be an important and transformative force.

8. Conclusion

This study's main aim was to explore how social interactions and inclusion of persons with disabilities have evolved over the years. It has probed the historical perspective of socializing persons with disabilities through examining practices in traditional as well as modern agents of socialisation. The study investigated the barriers and challenges faced by persons with disabilities in socializing. It examines issues such as stigma, discrimination, lack of accessibility, and limited social opportunities that hinder their participation in social activities. The study also proposed recommendations for future research, intervention strategies, and policy changes to promote greater social inclusion and participation for individuals with disabilities.

The authors contend that there is need for researchers to explore the effectiveness of support services in facilitating socialization for the PWD; to examine the role of peer support networks in facilitating for PWD; and analyse impact of policy changes on socialization practices for PWD.

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