

Disability: What is disability?

NID Training Disability Diary

- Compiled by Dr Jean Mitchell



Introduction

Disability is part of the human condition. Most people have experienced some type of disability, either permanently or temporarily in their lives. Disability is a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional concept. It is for this reason that definitions of disability vary according to their purpose (WHO and the World Bank, 2011). The term refers to the loss or reduction of psychological, intellectual, physical, or sensory powers and abilities. Such losses limit the opportunities individuals have to participate in education, general society and the workplace (Janse van Rensburg-Welling, 2020).

Definition of disability

The term disability is defined in many ways, and there have been many debates on the most accurate definition. One could say that disability is any condition that limits everyday activities can exist for a prolonged time, but the concept is more complicated than this. An international treaty on the rights of persons with disabilities, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), provides a framework for understanding disability to all its signatory countries. Even though the following has been described as a 'non-definition' (Iriarte, McConkey & Gilligan, 2016), the outline offered by the UNCRPD and the United Nations (2014: 17) provides a framework for discussion. They describe persons with disabilities as

'... those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'.

At the same time, the UNCRPD (UN, 2014) acknowledges that the concept of disability is evolving because of the interaction between society and persons with impairments or disabilities. Iriarte, McConkey and Gilligan (2016) argue that a definition should be adaptable and dynamic because the contexts and circumstances of disabilities are not static. The South African White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RSA, 2016) agrees with these authors and recognises that disability is an evolving idea that has been imposed by society.

Conclusion

As the attitudes of communities change to become more inclusive, the definition of disability will evolve even more. As the ideas of communities evolve from traditional beliefs that disability is the result of witchcraft to modern inclusive ideals, so will the definition.

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