

SELF-ACTUALIZATION OF INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY: ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Anna M. Shcherbakova

*Moscow State University of Psychology & Education,
Russia*

Abstract

The article focuses on the issue of self-actualization in children and adolescents with intellectual disability. It demonstrates the importance of fostering a positive personality potential to enhance self-actualization capacity. The article discusses the role of the close and broad social environment in supporting successful activities of mentally challenged children and adolescents. It stresses the need to design custom activity-based environments to ensure self-actualization of the mentally handicapped. It provides data from several empirical studies covered by the same approach.

Key words: intellectual disability, mental handicap, self-actualization, self-efficacy, sociocultural approach, rehabilitation environment.

Introduction

The problem of self-actualization of individuals with health disabilities is in very early stages of study. As for self-actualization of mentally handicapped individuals, there are far more questions than answers. According to Russia's Census Bureau, as of January 1, 2011, there were over 160,000 mentally handicapped children of high-school age in Russia. What happens to them after they leave school? What will define the success of their self-actualization? Looking at self-actualization in terms of the development of life skills and social competence, the author believes the study of this phenomenon in people with intellectual disabilities to be important and potentially beneficial.

The Object of the Research Establishment of self-actualization in children with intellectual disabilities

The Aims of the Research

- Theoretical substantiation of the issue
- Identification of mentally handicapped adolescents' perceptions regarding their own

success in various areas of life, measures of wellbeing and desirable professional activities in the future

- Feasibility study of expert evaluations of potential self-actualization in mentally handicapped adolescents

Methods and Organization of the Research

The study was conducted in several steps. In the first step, perceptions of mentally handicapped high-school students regarding the areas of their success (N = 20) were identified. Then criteria of wellbeing for the same category of respondents – high school students and graduates of a special education school (N = 120) were reviewed. In the third step, it was focused on evaluating the feasibility of desirable professional self-fulfillment in young people with varying degree of intellectual disability, ranging from moderate to minor (N = 23).

In all cases, custom questionnaires and one-on-one sessions with testers were used. In addition, in the third step the *Orientir* on-the-spot vocational guidance technique was applied. The study covered a total of 153 individuals.

Theoretical Background

The aspirations of self-fulfillment (or self-actualization) as defined by Maslow, 1982) reflect the human need to become the best person he or she can possibly become on the basis of available potential. Self-actualization can be understood as a product of the human desire to achieve success in an activity he or she believes significant, and constitutes an activity/function-based aspect of life (Klochko, Galazhinsky, 1999) – in other words, the principal condition for a person's self-actualization is an activity that results in his or her subjective satisfaction with the activity pertaining to significant areas of interests or relationships. In this manner, self-actualization helps improve the quality of life and considerably reduce the risk of adverse impact of challenging life circumstances, such as those related to health disabilities.

The content and forms of self-actualization are defined by both external factors and individual personality features and capabilities. Kudinov (2007) has proposed several conditions that define self-actualization, including psychoenvironmental, psychophysiological, pedagogical and social. Korostyleva (2005) believes that “unlocking the self-development potential is achieved both through an individual's own efforts and joint activities (“co-action”) with other people (close and remote relations), society and the world as a whole. She stresses that a person can achieve self-actualization as a unique wholesome individual only through meeting others (Selezneva, 2007).

Emergence of a child's ability to perceive one's own capabilities suggests that he/she is capable of self-appraisal (Stolin, 1983). A positive assessment of one's own capabilities becomes the basis for self-acceptance (Sergienko, 2008) and self-trust. A prerequisite for self-trust is a specific attitude toward one's own subjectivity as a value and regarding one's own future actions as safe (Skripkina, 2000). In addition, it is critical that successful actions be recognized and approved by people the person considers important. Moreover, it is not just the judgment but the expectations of the group – parents, teachers, micro- and macro-social environments (Vygotsky, 2000) – that to a large extent define the pattern and content of personal self-actualization.

The theory of “self-efficacy” (Bandura, 2000) postulates a person's conviction that he or she can demonstrate successful behavior in a challenging situation as a basis of self-actualization. The theory of self-efficacy is closely related to Seligman's theory of “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 2006).

A lack of faith in the efficacy of one's own actions may be one of the reasons for dysfunctional behavior when self-actualization assumes asocial or antisocial aspects.

Whether a certain individual can be successful in a given situation depends not only on his or her competency but on a large number of other factors. What is important, among other things, is not so much the objective outcome itself as its interpretation and expectations of success, i.e., a positive result of one's actions. Bandura (2000) used the concept of self-efficacy to systematically design approaches to treating personality disorders, mostly focusing on improving people's ability to recognize and make the best use of their capabilities. In doing so, he placed particular emphasis on the notion that even very modest capabilities, if properly employed, can enable a person to achieve significant success. Subsequent research convincingly demonstrated that low self-efficacy may be a serious impediment to the development of a person's social competence and commitment, and Bandura's ideas, when translated from clinical therapy to the area of social behavior regulation, have proven quite productive.

As shown above, self-actualization in a child is driven by an outlook for the future (vision) determined by the micro-social and macro-social environments. This vision reflects the child's psychophysical features. It materializes in the actual tasks of learning and gaining sociocultural experience correlated to the child's age and level of development. Experiencing one's own efficacy sets the stage for developing an adequate positive self-appraisal/self-esteem. Growing up in an environment inaccessible in terms of the level of challenges the child is faced with or imposing a vision that is not aligned with his or her needs and capabilities creates significant obstacles in his or her experience of self-efficacy, which ultimately blocks or distorts the child's ability to self-actualize.

A child with intellectual disability requires a sociocultural milieu that takes account of the "unique path" and applies "alternative methods" and "alternative tools" (Vygotsky, 2000) in social and cognitive development. Rehabilitation/habilitation of mentally challenged children should be based on the inclusion of their need for accessible communication and everyday tasks they face, and their potential incorporation in productive activities (Shcherbakova, Shemanov, 2010; Shcherbakova, 2010). It is necessary to design an optimal environment, a living space promoting the sense of self-worth and confidence in the mentally handicapped.

Such design should take into consideration private attitudes and behavior of "normal" people toward the mentally handicapped. Analyses of some studies of this topic (Cloerkes, 1980, cited in Zuber, Weis, Koch, 2006) have concluded that attitudes of "normal" people toward people with mental disabilities vary from explicitly positive to generally negative. These studies reveal a very consistent "hierarchy of popularity" of various disability categories. Handicapped people that better than others fit the social standards of the "able" (e.g., people suffering from intervertebral disc damage or asthma) are ranked the highest, while disabled people who, in the majority's opinion, cannot follow regulations, such as the mentally ill or intellectually challenged, rank at the bottom. In the author's opinion, this has to do with the perception that for the mentally disabled, standard grades of social success are difficult to achieve, and society currently does not see any other self-actualization criteria.

The lack of positive self-actualization criteria makes it difficult to create a family environment promoting the sense of self-worth in a mentally handicapped child. The family should provide such a child with a field of activity that supports his or her independence. Otherwise the mentally handicapped child – and then an adolescent and young adult – may later face conflicts with the family, substance abuse, or self-injurious or unlawful behavior (Zarubina, Indenbaum, 2009).

It is almost universally accepted that an individual's self-actualization finds its most vivid expression in creative ability. It is all the more interesting that an analysis of data gathered using the MSES questionnaire self-efficacy scale showed that the key self-efficacy components are two factors defined as everyday activities and social functioning (Middleton, Tate, Geraghty, 2003).

Content and Results of the Research

The first step of the study focused on identifying opinions of mentally handicapped high-school students regarding the area of their success. This was a comparative study involving both mentally handicapped adolescents and their “normally developing” peers. The present custom-designed questionnaire included the question: “What can you do best?” Thirty-eight percent of general-education school students gave negative or uninformative replies, while only one of the eight-grade learning-disabled respondents replied, “I do not know”. The pattern of positive replies also varied. The greatest difference was that 95 percent of handicapped adolescents shared their work accomplishments, while only three percent of their general-school peers shared theirs (Shcherbakova, 1998). Thus, the present study shows that mentally handicapped adolescents rank their work and social/domestic skills higher than any other skills, and even minor (from the standpoint of ‘normally developed’ adolescents) achievements give them a sense of accomplishment/success. It is important that these achievements have been reported in an area that can be understood and controlled by adolescents with intellectual disability.

To study the characteristics of personality self-determination and perceptions of a desirable future in slightly handicapped teenagers, custom-designed questionnaires were also used. The questionnaire replies enabled to identify perceived measures of wellbeing critical to teachers, graduates and high-school students of special and general-education schools. The special school teachers ranked their priorities as follows: a happy private life (90%); a good job and pay (75%); absence of problems (55%); material wellbeing (50%); and having friends (35%). The wellbeing criteria ranked by the general-education school teachers were somewhat different. They also ranked a good job and pay (65%) and personal and family health (35%) as the top priorities. On the other hand, they ranked a happy private life much lower (11%). They completely ignored material wellbeing, absence of problems or having friends but instead pointed out other criteria, such as living in harmony with oneself and the world around (25%) and social stability (15%). To identify major indicators and the significance of the variance between the members of the two school systems in the assessment of these indicators, the Mann-Whitney U-criterion and the Wilcoxon W-criterion (see Table 1) was applied.

Table 1. Perceived Major Wellbeing Indicators

Wellbeing indicators	Respondent categories (N= 120) / Ratio of responses selected (%)					
	Special school teachers	General school teachers	Special school graduates	General school graduates	Special school students	General school students
Good job and pay	75	65	80	35	50	20
Happy private life	90	11	65	45	70	35
Material wellbeing	50		70	10	65	10
Absence of problems	55		25	15	35	30

Many of the wellbeing indicators mentioned by the special school graduates were also mentioned by special school teachers.

The high-school students’ replies demonstrated a similar pattern. The special school students generally selected the same criteria as the special school teachers.

Neither the graduates nor the high-school students of the general education schools revealed such clear similarities across the majority of responses. On the contrary, the respondents in this category named various indicators of individual nature (feeling safe, self-fulfillment, living a life without evil/anger, being surrounded by nice people, and the ability

to deal with one's own problems). It is noteworthy that these values did not coincide with the wellbeing indicators selected by the general-school teachers.

Summing up the results of this step of the study, it was found that the perceived values of special school teachers, high-school students and graduates converged and represented large, clearly identifiable categories. General education respondents revealed a more diverse range of values, and the teachers', students' and graduates' perceived values were often different. This may indicate a greater degree of independence and lower impressionability of regular school students and their better understanding of the wide range of opportunities they will have after graduation. The changes in priorities between the age groups (high-school students versus graduates) may suggest influence of personal experience on the young adults' self-determination.

The author believes that the similarity of perceived wellbeing criteria among the teachers, high-school students and graduates of the special education school indicates that the staff has worked consistently to instill certain values and visions in their students, and it is this effort that promotes self-determination in the intellectually challenged youth. It was found that neither age nor life experience had any significant impact on the perceived values by special school graduates. It is the teachers, with their first-hand knowledge of their students' individual traits, who try to instill in them a vision of the future that best fits their capabilities.

Establishment of self-determination in advanced cases of mental disability has not been sufficiently studied. It has been attempted to identify the level of aspiration and self-appraisal by young people with advanced intellectual disability in a vocational education setting. It was found that students with considerable cognitive and emotional-volitional dysfunction often exhibited inadequate professional preferences. Most of the test subjects selected "director", "cosmonaut", "Beatles singer", "commander", "manager", "teacher", etc., as desirable jobs. Some students named (or wrote in) professions they were trained in at the college, focusing on their proven ability to perform that particular activity. When answering the question, "What job could you do?", the majority of the students named only the jobs they were being trained in (or similar jobs), with only a few adding professions that were off limits to them.

Young people with pronounced mental disabilities are generally attracted to accessible trades. On the other hand, a positive attitude to their future job is inconsistent, and a high or inadequate level of aspiration sometimes comes into conflict with the growing awareness of their limited capabilities as they go through vocational training. It is often difficult for students to align their "I want" with their "I can", which causes conflict between their desires and capabilities, and resultant self-doubt. At this stage, the teacher's and psychologist's professional counsel and individual approach become particularly important.

The same objectives in a survey of high-school students with minor mental disabilities were pursued. The *Orientir* on-the-spot vocational guidance technique to identify professional ambitions and aptitude was applied. The technique includes the Orientation Questionnaire and the Job Map. The Orientation Questionnaire consists of two components, "I Want" and "I Can". The "I Want" portion is designed to identify the mentally handicapped adolescents' perceptions of desirable jobs.

The "I Can" portion demonstrates how a person rates his or her professional skills. Responses from the second portion of the questionnaire can be used to gain a better understanding of a person's occupational leanings based on past data from custom professional aptitude tests.

Table 2. *Orientir* Survey Results

Test subject	Gender	Vocational aptitude or interests		Self-perceived vocational ability	
		“Subject of labor” attribute	“Nature of labor” attribute	“Subject of labor” attribute	“Nature of labor” attribute
1	F	Human-Nature Human-Word Picture	Performer	Human-Nature	Creative
2	M	Human-Human Human-Nature	Performer	Human-Machinery	Performer
3	F	Human-Word Picture	Performer	Human-Word Picture	Performer
4	M	Human-Word Picture	Creative	Human-Word Picture Human-Human	Creative
5	M	Human-Nature	Creative	Human-Machinery	Performer
6	M	Human-Nature	Creative	Human-Machinery	Performer
7	F	Human-Word Picture	Creative	Human-Word Picture	Creative

In the next step, an expert survey of the teachers working at the testees’ special school was conducted. Using the same questionnaire form, the teachers were asked to rate their students’ occupational abilities. Analysis of the teachers’ responses is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Teacher Survey Results

Test subject	Gender	Math teacher		Home economics / Shop teacher	
		“Subject of labor” attribute	“Nature of labor” attribute	“Subject of labor” attribute	“Nature of labor” attribute
1	F	Human-Human	Performer	Human-Human	Performer
2	M	Human-Machinery	Performer	Human-Machinery	Performer
3	F	Human-Human	Performer	Human-Human	Performer
4	F	Human-Human	Performer	Human-Human	Performer
5	M	Human-Machinery	Performer	Human-Machinery	Performer
6	M	Human-Human	Performer	Human-Machinery	Performer
7	F	Human-Human Human-Machinery	Performer	Human-Human Human-Nature	Performer

In evaluating the “Nature of Labor” attribute, the teachers unanimously decided that performer-type professions would be the best option for all of the students, even though half of the testees had revealed abilities and interests in creative-type professions on both the “I Can” and “I Want” scales. At first glance, it may be tempting to assume that there is a mismatch between the testees’ aspirations of creative activity and their abilities. But the author is willing to assume that in this case persistent stereotypes regarding the nature and products of creative activity as associated solely with the intellectual component are being dealt with. The author intends to further investigate this phenomenon in future research.

Conclusion

Environment designs in support of effective activities for individuals with intellectual disability should act as models to be incorporated into everyday life – i.e., the family and micro- and macro-communities – on the basis of positive motivation. Such models will promote the

positive personality potential of people with disabilities (Mahoney, Palyo, Napier, Giordano, 2008), which is impossible to achieve without cultivating their intensions and experiencing their own identity while tackling their real-life tasks relevant to their needs and capabilities at various activity levels. The need to identify new socially significant activities that enable the mentally handicapped to experience self-efficacy and support their self-actualization is specifically emphasized. It must be noted in conclusion that for many people with mental disability the need for a rehabilitation environment promoting their self-actualization is permanent.

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