



ПРИБЩАВАЩО ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

STUDENTS WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN HUNGARY AT
THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: *Initial attempts to conceptually define intellectual disability have played a significant role in the history of education of children with intellectual disabilities. In Hungary, the definition of intellectual disability has undergone many changes, which is related to disciplinary development. Nowadays, in special education, the term “intellectual disability” refers to a complex phenomenon which is reflected, for example, in the significant variability on the level of intellectual functioning. This study focuses on a narrower area of this very complex phenomenon. It makes children with mild intellectual disability – one of the categories of people with intellectual disabilities, the subject of analysis. The research analyzes the contemporary professional terminology and classification of mild intellectual disability on the basis of primary sources. It also examines whom and according to what symptoms professionals classified as a member of this student population, taking into account the scientific conceptions at the turn of the 20th century (for the naming of children with mild intellectual disability, see pp. 19–20). In pedagogical narratives published at that time, the term “weak- talented child” was the most commonly used expression.*

Keywords: *history of education and mentalities; pedagogical thinking; students with disabilities; special school.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 19th century, the dysfunction of Hungarian public education strongly manifested itself in terms of the education of students with mild intellectual disability. Statistical data show that the number of children who were qualified as having “abnormal” development, was on the rise at the turn of the 20th century (Juba 1900; 1909; Ujvary 1904). These children were legally excluded from public education or considered a challenge to public primary schools according to the extent to which their development differed from the national average. The public education system could not align with the particularities of each individual student. In the late 19th century, professionals voiced their concerns about students with lower abilities who were excluded from education. Public education policy wanted to handle this dysfunctionality by founding special institutions on the basis of foreign practice for children who could only meet the requirements set for them with the help of special learning procedures.

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In the second half of the 19th century, several doctors, pedagogues and civil organizations were looking for a solution to the schooling of the population of children with mild intellectual disability in Germany. Parents also participated in such endeavours as their children were deprived of the possibility to learn. They gradually started to accept that children, excluded from public education, could learn more successfully in isolated schools. To reflect on that social issue, they founded the first special classes and then independent special schools for weak-talented children. Friedrich Kern and Heinrich Ernst Stötzner can be regarded as pioneers of the movement supporting the establishment of special schools. The first special school opened to students in Dresden in 1867. Based on its example, additional institutions were established in larger German cities. In Hungary, where the process of embourgeoisement started later, the attitude change was slower in comparison with Western European countries. At the turn of the 20th century, the first special schools were founded in accordance with the German model. The network of special schools was set up decades later (Gordosné 1988). According to professionals, one of the major advantages of special schools offering segregated education is that they contribute to the education of citizens useful to society who are capable of living an independent life.

Finding and diagnosing students with mild intellectual disability was based on the subjective observations of doctors and pedagogues until the adoption of the first intelligence test. Due to its inaccuracy, the method was not reliable. Contemporary pedagogical narratives drew the attention of the discipline to this fact (Roboz 1898). At the turn of the century, the need for examining intellectual capabilities was strengthened. The Binet–Simon Intelligence Scales was a milestone in the history of measuring mental capabilities. In Hungary, Mátyás Éltes, member of the Experimental Department of the Society for Child Education, took over the task of adapting the French intelligence test to the Hungarian circumstances, which was published in 1914 with the title “A gyermeki intelligencia vizsgálata” [Investigation of Child Intelligence] (Éltes 1914; Vajda 2006). The development of psychometry helped children obtain the education that corresponded to their abilities.

2. INTERPRETING THE NOTION OF MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Pedagogical narratives at the turn of the 20th century referred to children with mild intellectual disability as “weak-talented”. Attempts to interpret “weak talent” appeared in professional discourse, which reflected the contemporary conceptions of the discipline on the phenomenon. The theory and practice in German-speaking regions had a huge impact on the pedagogical and special educational disciplinary development.

First, it is worth scrutinizing József Roboz’s work *A gyenge tehetségűek gondozása* [Educating Weak-Talented Children], published in 1898. It can be considered the first pedagogical draft on the education of weak-talented children in separate institutions in the Hungarian education policy. The headmaster went on several study tours in Germany in order to get acquainted with the functioning of special schools founded for weak-talented students. He wrote his first draft which discusses the conceptions and categories of intellectual disabilities based on the experience he had gained abroad.

Roboz states that:

“Weak-talented children cannot be categorized as either dumb (people with profound intellectual disability) or feeble-minded (people with severe intellectual disability), as in terms of their capacity to be educated they exceed considerably the idiots and imbeciles. What is more, with the help of special education, they can be brought to a level which is close to normal intellectual capabilities. Furthermore, in some cases, such a child, after having received special education for one or two years, can go to a public elementary school, as it has already been proven by foreign special schools” (Roboz 1898: 13).

It can be seen that, in his pedagogical approach, he distinguishes among children with various levels of intellectual deficiency in terms of their learning capabilities. He emphasizes that weak-talented children have lower performance, but they can be trained under special circumstances. He sees the

criterion of trainability to the extent to which the personality development of children with disabilities differs from the intellectual level of a normal child. In his definition, he draws attention to the imperative that weak-talented students should be helped from a pedagogical perspective in the frame of isolated education. Part of them should go to special schools only temporarily as they can be reintegrated into public education in one or two years due to the special education methods that are used there. It can again become possible to educate them together with healthy children in public schools.

Mátyás Éltés is considered one of the prestigious professionals who supported the foundation of special schools and the establishment of differentiated institutional treatment of children with disabilities (Gordosné 2001). He published the book *Közérdekű tudnivalók [Instructions of General Interest]* in 1905. His book *A gyengétehetségű gyermekek oktatására szolgáló kiegészítő-iskolákra [On Special Schools Serving the Education of Weak-Talented Children]* contains the first temporary curriculum of special schools. In the first chapter of the work, he defines the concept of “weak talent”. According to his definition, it can be claimed that:

“weak-talented usually means a child who is unable to acquire the compulsory learning material and to keep pace with students who are averagely talented, despite regularly going to school and being taught with average pedagogical methods on a regular basis. Weak talent is an intellectual disability, although it is not as visible as idiocy or imbecility. Nevertheless, it is often misinterpreted as laziness and is qualified as carelessness” (Éltés 1905: 5).

This definition focuses on the pedagogical dimension of mild intellectual disability. Éltés puts those in the category of weak-talented children who are unable to learn successfully under the circumstances at a regular school. Their development cannot be secured in the pedagogical conditions of a public school. Without receiving additional help, they are limited in the learning process. One can find references to the issue of diagnosing it in that period on the basis of this description.

The education of children with mild intellectual disability was a topic of professional discourse in *Néptanítók Lapja [Journal of Public Tutors]* at the turn of the 20th century. Articles were published on statistical data about the number of special schools and weak-talented students. They presented models based on experiences abroad. In this regard, they dealt with the interpretation of terminologies. Lajos Sretvizer introduced Károly Décsi’s book *A gyermekek gyakorlatilag fontosabb szellemi rendellenességei [The More Important Mental Disorders of Children from a Practical Perspective]* in Volume 4 of *Néptanítók Lapja*, published in 1905, where one can find a detailed description of the concept of “weak talent”.

According to Sretvizer’s interpretation,

“Weak-talented children, namely those who are unable to keep pace with healthy children of the same age by the means of regular teaching methods, used to educate healthy children, because of their chronic mental disability, cannot be educated in the normal way; they can only be educated in a manner and with tools which correspond to their intellectual state. In the case of the weak-talented, the intellectual defect: 1. originates from a disease, syndrome; 2 is a congenital disease or a disease which has developed at a very early age; 3. only reaches a smaller level on which the children can be educated effectively, but special pedagogical methods are needed.” (Sretvizer 1905: 8 – 9).

By analyzing this interpretation which conveys a strong medical perspective, one can conclude that Décsi separates the population of the weak-talented from the learning disorders that are not based on biological factors, thus from intellectual disabilities coming from a social background, behavioural problems due to environmental factors, sensory disabilities and mental disabilities of greater severity. Similar to the above-mentioned theoretical models in the framework of this particular differentiation-oriented approach is the standpoint that weak-talented students cannot be educated effectively with traditional pedagogical methods, but they need special attention, and pedagogical practices have a central role.

On the basis of a detailed conceptual analysis, one can conclude that, at the turn of the 20th century, authors interpreted the concept of “weak talent” in a medical paradigm and from a pedagogical

perspective. The starting point is the very existence of the disability, while the primary task of pedagogy is to compensate for the deficits of various injured functions. One cannot find a generally accepted and precise definition to describe the term in contemporary disciplinary discourse, but some similarities do exist with regard to some common elements. The definitions consider mild intellectual disability to be a consequence that can be described by a complex syndrome and casual processes. Thus, they make the factual existence of disabilities the focal point of pedagogical activity. The authors classified the population of weak-talented students as students with mild intellectual disability. They originated the causes that hinder the normal development from somatic and psychic disorders. Consequently, they defined a chronic problem in terms of their learning process, which they related to the disorder of intellectual capabilities of weak-talented children.

3. SYMPTOMS AND CAUSES OF MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

By researching the symptoms that can be observed in terms of weak-talented children, it can be stated that professionals have already discovered the complex phenomenon of intellectual disability in the second half of the 19th century. Psychiatrist Pál Ranschburg and special education pedagogue József Roboz demonstrated the symptoms of mild intellectual disability in a differentiated manner based on a scientific standpoint. Ranschburg discussed the physical and mental symptoms on the basis of his medical observations, while Roboz presented the psychic particularities in detail along with the physical and cognitive features. They both highlighted weak physique, a delay in the development of motor skills, abnormal skull growth, abnormal dental development and bad teeth among the possible symptoms. An interesting difference between the two approaches is that while Roboz considered the physical development normal or described minor developmental differences (e.g. weak, skinny physique; remarkably thin limbs), Ranschburg also mentioned serious physical deficits as additional symptoms. He listed the following examples: rickets, bone deformities, attached earlobes, earflaps with awkward shape in an abnormal position and exaggerated length of arms. These examples make me draw the conclusion that, in the description of the psychiatrist, the symptoms of the disabilities of various severities are confused with each another if one compares his descriptions to the current special education knowledge. In the category of mild intellectual disability, one can also come across the symptoms of more severe mental disabilities. As for the cognitive symptoms, both professionals draw attention to low intellectual capabilities, concentration disorder (the scarcity of its duration, the lesser extent of its intensity), difference in anamnesis and disorder of tactile properties. Both of them put the emphasis on the abnormal development of communication skills, articulation disorders and other communication difficulties manifested by the rhythm of their speech (Roboz 1898; Sretvizer 1905). Roboz also summarized the emotional consequences of mental disabilities. He claimed that the symptoms of “weak talent” were paired with emotional problems and disorders of socialization which could be manifested in the child being moody or shy. Ranschburg and Roboz believed that weak talent stemmed from the differences in intellectual and physical development. Roboz also complemented this theory by the particularities of the psychic aspect. According to their view, intellectual disabilities not only touch upon mental development, but they also have an impact on the development of motor skills, tactile properties and socio-emotional competences.

In order to comprehend mild intellectual disability more easily, it is necessary to have an overview of the direct and indirect causes to which the professionals attributed “weak talent”. Pál Ranschburg took several causes into consideration in relation to various phenomena. He claimed that the origins of the disorders are:

“the syphilis of the parents, their alcoholism, kinship, neuropathic or psychopathic burden, preterm birth, rickets, infectious diseases, epilepsy, organic diseases of the nervous system, skull injuries and so forth” (Sretvizer 1905: 9).

To put it differently, the psychiatrist attributed mild intellectual disability to congenital and acquired factors which can be internal or endogenous (biological and psychological characteristics of the individual) and external or exogenous ones (environmental factors). In his view, the most common factors are infections suffered by the mother, toxic materials to which the foetus has been exposed, and or-

ganic injuries of the nervous system. It is also remarkable that he claimed that the diagnosis is a medical task. With this statement, he also established the hierarchy of the professionals involved in the process.

4. CONCLUSION

In Hungary at the turn of the 20th century, the viewpoint became more accepted that the education of students with mild intellectual disability require special pedagogical methods. In accordance with the standpoint, participants in public education endeavoured to help and facilitate the education of this group of abnormal children by separating them from normal children and by applying special methods for the sake of their training. The long-term goal was to secure the proper development of disabled children and to reintegrate them into society.

Professionals qualified as “weak-talented” students those children who could not perform well in average pedagogical circumstances because of their intellectual level, and whose trainability is different from that of the others. The interpretation of the concepts was primarily based on medical and pedagogical approaches which drew attention to the pedagogical aspect of the medical factors.

The conceptual analysis of the elements of various definitions contributed to the conclusion that, on the basis of the representations inherent to the concepts, one can make assumptions on the contemporary intrinsic processes of pedagogical thinking. The study can serve as a foundation for the historical analysis of the process of professional endeavours to educate children with mild intellectual disability from a pedagogical and special educational point of view. It can also contribute to the exploration of the establishment and institutional history of special schools.

NOTES

¹ **Karl Friedrich Kern (1814 – 1908)**: doctor, pedagogue and Headmaster of the Institution for Deaf and Mutes in Weimar, then in Leipzig, Germany.

² **Heinrich Ernst Stötzner (1832 – 1910)**: German pedagogue, Headmaster of the Institution for Deaf and Mutes in Dresden between 1855 and 1887, and forefather of special schools.

³ **József Roboz (1864 – 1908)**: key figure in the establishment of education in special schools, special education teacher and researcher. He was one of the first supporters of the Binet–Simon Intelligence Scales in Hungary who also applied it in practice. He laid down the foundations of special education in the same country.

⁴ The first volume of *Néptanítók Lapja* was published on 6 February 1868. Between 1868 and 1874, it was published on a weekly basis. Then, between 1874 and 1944, a new volume was available for readers every two weeks. The main aim of the pedagogical journal was to spread information about the Hungarian language public education and to help everyday pedagogical work. In the journal, both methodological and general pedagogical articles were published. The authors discussed knowledge of general interest to teachers in public schools, official announcements, job opportunities, courses, methods and learning materials used in Hungarian education. It also presented excerpts of lectures at Hungarian and foreign conferences and educational experiences abroad.

⁵ **Lajos Sretvizer (1845 – 1926)**: headmaster and teacher. He graduated from a primary school in Bratislava, a secondary school specialized in sciences in the same city, and a training school in Budapest. He received his pedagogical degree in 1864. Three years later, he successfully completed the Physical Education course. He participated in study tours abroad (primarily in Germany and Switzerland) by ministerial order. He reported his experience in *Népnevelők Lapja*. By that time, he had become co-author of the journal. He was also an exceptional textbook writer (Szinyeyi, 1909).

⁶ **Károly Décsi (unknown birthdate)**: psychiatrist. He regularly held lectures on the treatment of mentally ill people. He published several works together with Pál Ranschburg. The Board of Teachers at the Faculty of Medicine assigned the task of writing the book *Lelki gyógy módok [Psychotherapy]* to Pál Ranschburg and Károly Décsi in 1899. The work was awarded by the Board of Teachers and published a year later. One of his other books, *A gyermekek gyakorlatilag fontosabb szellemi rendellenességei [The More Important Mental Disorders of Children from a Practical Perspective]*, was published on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs in 1904, which was also reported by the journal *Magyar Tanítóképző [Hungarian Teacher Trainer]*.

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