

Advocacy and self-advocacy in Malta: Reflections on the lives of Maltese people with intellectual disability from the 1950s to the present day

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Abstract

Background: This article presents an overview and discussion of the main developments in the lives of persons with intellectual disability in Malta over the last 70 years in residential services, education, employment, friendships and relationships, culture, sport and leisure activities, having a say in one's own life and how people look at persons with intellectual disability. It also discusses who were the people who played important parts in these developments.

Materials and Methods: The article is written by an academic and two self-advocates with lived experience of intellectual disability. The first author wrote the literature review tracing developments in the disability sector in Malta. These topics were then discussed by the three authors.

Results: Thanks to these developments, persons with intellectual disability can live more independently in their community and develop their potential, including the ability to speak for themselves. However, many persons with intellectual disability do not have a say over how they live their lives and experience a lot of control. Very often, it is other people who decide for them. Persons with intellectual disability should enjoy relationships in which they are cared for and they care for others. They should also play an important part in the development of services that are aimed at them.

Conclusions: The authors composed a poem which reflects the main issues that the two self-advocates consider to be the most important: support, other people's attitudes and knowing what persons with intellectual disability want.

Keywords

advocacy, choice and control, independent living, Malta, self-advocacy

Accessible summary

- The lives of people with intellectual disability in Malta have improved a lot over the past 70 years.
- People used to be completely cut off from society and from their community and there were no support services at all until the 1960s.
- From the 1960s onwards, different services, welfare benefits and laws were put in place that have made it possible for people with intellectual disability in Malta to live better lives.
- Thanks to the support they have received, people have achieved a lot and have shown how capable they are.
- People with intellectual disability can speak themselves, make choices and take decisions but they do not always have the opportunity to do so.
- It is very important that others listen to what they have to say about their lives and base decisions on what these people say that they need and want.

Introduction

Very little is known about the lives of persons with intellectual disability in Malta before the 1950s. Historical accounts of developments in the Maltese disability sector usually start with the work of a Catholic priest, Monsignor Mikiel Azzopardi. There are very good reasons to use his work as a starting point. It was he who first worked to improve the quality of life of disabled people and to get them accepted in Maltese society (Cuschieri, 1995).

In the next section, we explain how we wrote this article. This is followed by an overview of developments in the disability sector in Malta from Azzopardi's work to the present. We then discuss these developments according to different themes. The account of these developments shows that they were based on different ways of looking at disabled people—as objects of charity, recipients of state welfare and eventually holders of rights. These three ways are all present in the contemporary Maltese culture. Our analysis shows how work in the disability sector in the first three decades or so, was mainly led by professionals, parents of disabled children and philanthropists. The contribution of disabled people, and especially of persons with intellectual disability, is a more recent development. Each author also shares personal reflections on these issues. The article concludes with a poem based on the main points that we discussed.

How We Wrote This Article

The outline of developments in Malta regarding disabled persons presented above was written by Anne-Marie and is based on a review of the relevant literature. This literature comprised published empirical research, postgraduate dissertations and theses, books about the disability sector in Malta, writings by prominent Maltese disabled activists and grey literature. Anne-Marie then prepared an easy-to-read summary in Maltese which we discussed and revised together. We also viewed a video called “Dare to Love” by the theatre group Opening Doors (Department of Disability Studies, 2021) and commented on it. Below we explain why we chose this video. Anne-Marie then wrote up the discussion, using themes that emerged from the discussion. We met again to discuss and finalise the write-up. Each of us also added their own personal reflection and then we put together the found

poem which concludes this article. Isabel has expertise in reviewing easy-to-read documents in Maltese and in English. She read through the English version of the whole article together with Anne-Marie so that they could make sure that it is written in accessible language. Brian and Isabel came up with the ideas for the poem in the conclusion and Anne-Marie supported them to write it.

Developments in the Lives of Maltese People with Intellectual Disability

Residential services

The most important contribution of Monsignor Azzopardi was the setting up of the Dar tal-Providenza as a home for disabled people in 1965. Bonnici (2005) recounts the history of how this home was setup. At the time, having a disabled family member—especially if they had an intellectual disability—was a source of shame and many of them were kept hidden in the family home, for example in the basement. Azzopardi had been working for many years with disabled people and he was aware of their situation. He wanted to have a large house for them in the community, but he did not have the money to buy a stretch of land or a property to do that. So he thought he could make use of the land available at the former Navy Rest Camp in Siggiewi which was handed over by the Government to the Malta Catholic Action in 1962. He decided to start building the home in Siggiewi, hoping people would support him with monetary donations to reach his aim, which is in fact what happened. This is where the Dar tal-Providenza was built and where it is still today (Dar tal-Providenza, 2021).

For a very long time, this was the only place which offered residential services for disabled persons. The other options were an old people's home or a mental institution (Bezzina, 2017). The next development was the opening of group homes: Dar il-Wens in 1989 (Massa, 2004) and Dar Nazareth in 1995 (Fondazzjoni Nazareth, 2021). Most of the residents in these homes and institutions are persons with intellectual disability. In 1990, the National Parents Society for Persons with Disability set up Dar il-Kaptan, which provides respite services for persons with intellectual disability (Dar il-Kaptan, 2021). The move towards small community-based homes started in 2001 when the state-funded Aġenzija Support was

set up (Aġenzija Sapport, 2021). Dar tal-Providenza has also opened community-based homes and at present it has four such homes (Dar tal-Providenza, 2019).

In her review of different studies about disabled people in Malta, Bezzina (2018) reports that many persons with intellectual disability do not have much opportunity to have a say in their daily lives. Many of them experience overprotection and their lives are dominated by others, including family members and staff working in different services (Buhagiar & Azzopardi-Lane, 2020; Callus et al., 2019). They do not enjoy the right to choose where to live, with who and with which arrangements even if this right is in the UNCRPD Act (2021), which made the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006) part of Maltese law (see also Borg, 2021).

Education

The first special schools providing education for children with intellectual disability in Malta opened in the 1960s (Camilleri & Callus, 2001). In 2010, changes were made to how these schools are run and they were turned into resource centres. There are five such centres which are attended by students with intellectual disability (Ministry for Education, 2021). There are also many children with intellectual disability who attend mainstream schools. They are supported by learning support educators (LSEs). Inclusive education started in Malta in 1994, after the country signed the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). At first, there was resistance to the presence of students with disability in mainstream classrooms (Camilleri, 1999).

The rights of disabled persons for inclusive education are protected by the Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act (EOA) (2000), the UNCRPD and the UNCRPD Act (2021). However, the Maltese education system is still not fully inclusive. As Bajada et al. (2021) argue, disabled children in mainstream schools are still seen as being different and not part of the norm.

In terms of acceptance by nondisabled children, different studies show that there are different levels of acceptance. A. Bonello et al. (2012) report the difficulties two of the authors, who have an intellectual disability, experienced in mainstream schools especially at the secondary level. Likewise, Bezzina (2018) found that students with intellectual disability and those with behaviour or with communication difficulties are the least likely to be accepted. Cremona (2019, p. 89) observes that:

It cannot be concluded the children definitely hold a disabling culture or an inclusive culture. Nonetheless, it can be said that although children hold negative attitudes which create a disabling culture, their positive attitudes may partially counterbalance the disabling culture.

One of the positive effects of inclusive education at the primary and secondary levels is that opportunities have also developed for persons with intellectual disability at postsecondary level, especially in the area of vocational education. The main vocational education institutions in Malta, MCAST (2021) and the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS, 2021), offer such opportunities. A study by Pleven & Callus (2017) shows that young people with intellectual disability can benefit a lot from vocational courses although this does not mean that they find it easy to become employed.

Employment

While education for children with intellectual disability has been available in Malta for over 50 years, even if in segregated schools for most of its history, opportunities for employment for adults with intellectual disability started to become available much more recently. Day services for adults with intellectual disability began to be set up in the late 1970s with the main aim being that of providing these adults with opportunities to develop their abilities and to prevent them from having to spend all day at home, therefore also providing respite for their primary caregivers (Bezzina, 2017). Even after the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in mainstream schools from 1994 onwards, career guidance for them came later. In fact, Azzopardi (2005) remarks on the lack of career guidance for persons with disability.

Today, there are various types of support for persons with intellectual disability to enter the world of work. The most important organisation is the Lino Spiteri Foundation, which provides pre-employment training, sheltered employment training as well as job coaches for persons with intellectual disability in open employment (Lino Spiteri Foundation, 2021). The rights of disabled persons in employment are protected by the EOA, the UNCRPD, the Persons with Disability (Employment) Act (1969) and the UNCRPD Act (2021).

There are some persons with intellectual disability in employment. However, the results of the 2011 Census (CRPD, 2021) show that only 7.1% of persons with intellectual disability were employed at the time. More recent research by the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD, 2020) shows that persons with intellectual disability are more likely to be unemployed than employed. Persons with intellectual disability formed 20.4% of those who are employed and 31.4% of those who are unemployed. This study also states that persons with intellectual disability are more likely to work part-time and less likely to have career progression. This finding is confirmed in Bonello's (2015) study of the right to nondiscrimination in the area of employment for persons with disability also observes that people with intellectual disability are particularly likely to encounter discrimination in this area, despite the existence of legislation that safeguards their rights.

One of the reasons that people with intellectual disability may meet more obstacles than other disabled persons in employment is the added support that they need in order for their employment to be a success. Attard's (2017) research is a case study about "Fabio," a young man with intellectual disability in employment. She studies Fabio's situation in terms of a system with different components which together made it possible for Fabio to find a job and retain it. These components include Fabio's skills, interest, educational level and personality; the support he receives from his family; the provision of formal support services, especially job coaching; and the support he receives from his employer and his colleagues. This case study is a clear example of how people with intellectual disability can be successfully included in open employment. It also highlights how success depends on having a supportive environment.

Apart from education and employment, there are other important aspects of life, including friendships and relationships as well as taking part in leisure and cultural activities.

Friendships and relationships

At the time when Monsignor Azzopardi started working with disabled persons, many of them were very isolated. Once services such as special schools and day centres started to be provided, these persons had possibilities to meet people outside of their family home, especially other disabled persons. The setting up of different nongovernmental organisations (Camilleri & Callus, 2001) provided further opportunities for them to participate in different activities. There are many organisations in Malta that work with people with intellectual disability, a few of which we mention below. Involvement in these organisations enables persons with intellectual disability to meet new people and form new friendships. However, they mostly meet their friends only when they attend the activities and do not have a lot of opportunities to go out on their own or with their friends. Callus et al. (2019) show that many people with intellectual disability experience overprotection. These researchers also found that those who need support to be able to go out independently often depend on family members for this support.

People with intellectual disability face even more obstacles in forming long-term intimate relationships and having a family. Many people with intellectual disability aspire to have these experiences, as found in research by Azzopardi-Lane (2017) and Farrugia (2019). Some of them also manage to have intimate relationships and find support from their families (Azzopardi-Lane [2017], Farrugia [2019] and Muscat [2019]). However, as these researchers have also found, not all families are supportive and many people with intellectual disability also encounter a lot of prejudice. Many people consider them to be like children and do not accept that they have sexuality. Bezzina (2018) refers to two studies about intimate relationships and sexuality that were carried out in Malta by Debattista (2015) and Zammit (2017, p. 39) and states that:

Both studies find that people with disability face obstacles in sexuality and intimate relationships (including sexual expression). These obstacles are due to societal stigma and stereotypes and internalised ideas regarding disability and sexuality, especially

when it comes to people with intellectual disability. Both authors cite cultural and religious beliefs, including stereotypical ideas of family life and marriage, as well as the tragedy model of disability, as some of the barriers that disabled people face in this area. This is further compounded by inaccessible (or lack of) information and sexual education, as well as lack of preparation from parents and caregivers towards expressing sexuality and developing safe socio-sexual relationships. Other factors cited by the authors include physical inaccessibility, lack of privacy and lack of opportunities for social interaction.

These different studies show that people with intellectual disability can have a good life when they find support from their families and from those who work with them, when they have opportunities to take part in different activities and when they are accepted by society.

Cultural, sport and leisure activities

As mentioned above, there are a number of organisations that provide opportunities for persons with intellectual disability in Malta to take part in different types of activities. Some of these organisations have existed for a long time and are run by parents of persons with intellectual disability. For example, the Down Syndrome Association Malta was set up in 1981 (Camilleri-Clarke, 2021). It provides support for people with Down syndrome and their families and advocates on their behalf.

Over the past 20 years, there has been an increase in opportunities for persons with intellectual disability to take part in cultural, sport and leisure activities. Regarding sport, Special Olympics Malta was set up in 2000 (Special Olympics, 2021). Mamo (2017) carried out narrative research with a Special Olympics athlete which shows how success was achieved through “the determination, enthusiasm and resilience of the disabled person herself backed by the support and belief in her potential by both her parents and coaches alike” (p. vi).

Apart from this, Opening Doors is a nongovernmental organisation which has theatre, music and dance groups for persons with intellectual disability. As Baldacchino (2018) explains, the groups combine an educational with a professional approach through which the performers with intellectual disability are guided and tutored at the same time as being empowered to express themselves artistically. Examples of the work by Opening Doors performers can be seen in the blogs by Angela Bettone (Opening Doors, 2021) and the webinar on Disabled Persons and Parenting (Department of Disability Studies, 2021).

Some state-funded agencies offer opportunities for socialising. The national youth agency, Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ runs BE, a youth club for young people with intellectual disability who are supported by youth workers (Aġenzija Żaġħżagħ, 2021) while Aġenzija Support (2021) runs a befriending service called Sharing Lives. Grupp Flimkien Naslu (2021) is a self-advocacy group run by persons with intellectual disability which organises social activities for its members. It was set up in 2004. In fact, it is only in recent history that disabled persons started speaking up for themselves in Malta (Gauci, 2020).

Having a say in one's own life

Of all the different organisations that we have mentioned, the only one which is run by persons with intellectual disability is Grupp Flimkien Naslu. This group was set up as a result of a course in public speaking skills for persons with intellectual disability organised by the then National Commission Persons with Disability (which has now become the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability) (Bezzina, 2017). It was in fact this Commission that started to organise activities to promote the self-advocacy of persons with intellectual disability. This study eventually led to the setting up of the Consultative Committee of Persons with Intellectual Disability in 2007. Some of the members of this Committee cowrote an article on the choices that people with intellectual disability would like to make in their lives. This article, titled "How we like to live when we have the chance" (Deguara et al., 2012), was published in the special issue of this journal on "The research and work of people with learning disabilities with their allies and supporters." The work of the Consultative Committee is a clear example of how persons with intellectual disability are capable of expressing opinions and taking decisions, especially when they are supported to

do so. This capability also comes through in research by Buhagiar and Azzopardi-Lane (2020).

It is a capability which is also being increasingly recognised. One of the most important developments in the protection of the rights of persons with intellectual disability was the adoption of the guardianship law in 2012 (Guardianship Law, 2012). This law is not in line with Article 12 of the UNCRPD (Equal recognition before the law) because it provides for guardians who have the power to act as substitute decision-makers. However, it is better than the legislation on interdiction and incapacitation, which it has replaced. Unlike the latter, the guardianship law allows for partial guardianship—for example, to help the person with managing their money allowing them to make decisions in other areas—and requires the guardian to act according to the will of the person with intellectual disability as much as possible and to promote their autonomy and independence.

How people look at persons with intellectual disability

The developments outlined in this section show how much the quality of life of persons with intellectual disability has improved. However, they also show that there are still many obstacles that need to be removed. One of these obstacles is the attitudes of people in general towards persons with disability and especially towards persons with intellectual disability. Gauci (2020) observes that many of the studies about disability carried out in Malta show that people with disability are aware of their rights but that this awareness is not present in society in general. She writes that these studies found that:

Society is dragging its feet when it comes to implementing the necessary changes in practice. They also found that the idea still exists that we need to protect persons with disability, the idea of pity of charity, and that they need someone to take care of them (Gauci, 2020, p. 23).

In the case of persons with intellectual disability, there is the added obstacles of being infantilised and seen as being asexual (Azzopardi-Lane, 2021). Another issue faced by persons with intellectual disability dates from the time when Monsignor Azzopardi

started his work in the 1960s. As Camilleri and Callus (2001) explain, at a time when many disabled people were hidden and seen as a source of shame, Azzopardi referred to them as angels to enable them to get rid of the stigma associated with them. Unfortunately, the use of this term has persisted especially in relation to persons with intellectual disability (Casha, 2016).

Discussion

Our discussion of the developments outlined through the review of the literature focused on four themes which we discuss below: independent living, developing personal potential, being with others and self-advocacy. We focused a lot on the relationships of persons with intellectual disability with other persons (with or without intellectual disability). We felt that the most important part of these relationships is that people act towards each other with love. This made Isabel and Anne-Marie think of the video “Dare to Love” in which three members of the theatre group of Opening Doors recite poems they wrote about love. This video was first presented at a webinar held by the Department of Disability Studies (2021), which the two of us attended. Our comments about what these three persons with intellectual disability say about love is also presented below. This section ends with the personal reflections of all of us.

Independent living

When we discussed the developments in services for persons with intellectual disability to live independently, we saw that a lot of progress has been made. They are no longer kept hidden or kept out of society. In fact, today, there are many services that help persons with intellectual disability to live in the community. We also saw that there were many people who have advocated for persons with intellectual disability in the past and many others who continue to do this. There are parents of persons with intellectual disability, those working in the disability sector (some of whom are persons with physical or sensory disability) and benefactors. The work that these persons did in the past and the work that they do in the present is very important.

However, we saw that the views of persons with intellectual disability about independent living are very often not heard and that very often it is other people who advocate on their behalf. The research we mentioned above shows that many persons with intellectual disability do not have much control over how they live their lives. They also do not have much control about how residential services are run.

One of the problems that many persons with intellectual disability have is that they need support from someone to be able to do the things that they would like to do. If those providing support think that persons with intellectual disability can get hurt, they tend to overprotect these persons. As a result, there are a lot of things that persons with intellectual disability are told that they cannot do, even if they say that they would like to do them. Therefore, when there is advocacy without self-advocacy, things get done the way that persons without intellectual disability think they should get done. This does not mean that they are always done badly but they are done better when these persons have a say.

Persons with intellectual disability can express their views about what they would like to do. There are persons who can make choices on their own and then do what they would like to do. There are others who can make choices on their own and then need someone to support them to do what they would like to do. Then there are others who also need support to be able to make choices—for example, someone to talk to them about the different things they could do and to help them choose between them. There are also those who need support to express themselves because they find it difficult to talk. The important thing is that everyone has the chance to express their views and to make choices, and that they have the support they need to live independently according to their own wishes.

Developing personal potential

One of the reasons why the work carried out by parents, workers and benefactors in the past and at present is very important is that the services that they set up provided persons with intellectual disability with the opportunity to show how much they are capable of achieving when they are given the right support. This study also led to laws that protect the rights of all persons with disability, including those with intellectual disability.

For example, when students with intellectual disability were given the right to education in special schools, they could show that they were capable of learning if teaching methods were adapted for their needs. Then, when inclusive education became a right, these students could show that they were capable of learning together with students without disability if they had an LSE. They continued to show their ability to learn when they could attend postsecondary courses. In fact, persons with intellectual disability are not only capable of learning but they are also capable of teaching others. Isabel takes part in disability equality training as part of her work. Apart from that, both Isabel and Brian deliver talks to university students with Anne-Marie about their experiences of living with an intellectual disability in Malta. The students are always interested in learning about these experiences. For many of them, it is the first time that they can listen to a person with intellectual disability speaking about their life. This is a very important aspect of self-advocacy.

Another important area of personal development is employment. For a long time, persons with intellectual disability were excluded from the workplace. When their right to employment was recognised and they began to have opportunities to learn employment-related skills, to have vocational training and to have support in the workplace, they could show their abilities in the area of employment. These developments show that it is very important for persons with intellectual disability to have opportunities to develop their personal potential, just like everybody else. These opportunities are important not only in education and employment but also for persons with intellectual disability to develop all their abilities, including in the areas of culture, sport and leisure activities.

It is good that there are so many opportunities for persons with intellectual disability in Malta and that there are laws to protect their rights. But there is more work that needs to be done. As we said earlier, there are many people with intellectual disability who experience overprotection. As a result, they cannot learn the skills they need to be more independent. The more opportunities and support that persons with intellectual disability are given, the more they can show what they are capable of. Other people's attitudes are therefore a very important factor in the lives of persons with intellectual disability.

As with independent living, an important aspect of developing personal potential is for a person to be able to express their preferences about education, employment and leisure time activities. It is very important for other persons to advocate and work for the provision of services for persons with intellectual disability in these areas. However, these persons cannot decide what a person with intellectual disability should do. The person should first say what they would like to do and then be supported to follow their aspirations.

Being with others

As we saw in the first part of this article, the development of various services and the different activities organised for persons with intellectual disability have enabled them not only to develop their potential but also to spend time with different people. Some of the services and activities are provided specifically for persons with intellectual disability. In this case, these persons spend their time with other persons with intellectual disability and with staff or volunteers working with them. In other cases, persons with intellectual disability use services and take part in activities that are open to everyone. Therefore, they can be with persons with or without intellectual disability.

It is important that they have a choice about the persons they would like to spend their time with. But it is also important to see why certain persons with intellectual disability do not like to be with persons without disability who do not know them. Unfortunately, there are people who make fun of persons with intellectual disability. There are even those who abuse them. This is a reason why some persons with intellectual disability do not like to be with people they do not know already, but it is not good if persons with intellectual do not feel safe with people they do not know.

It is very important for persons with intellectual disability to be treated with respect and to be given the support they need. This will help them not to give up trying to be with others so that they can develop their abilities by continuing their education, by finding good jobs and by developing their talents. They can also develop friendships with different people and

have intimate relationships with special people in their lives. They can also contribute to society and show others what they are capable of.

Perhaps the most important thing for persons with intellectual disability is that they can make their voices heard and that these voices are listened to. This is the best way for other people to get to know them better and to learn about what they can do. It is also the way to ensure that persons with intellectual disability can make choices and live their lives on their own terms.

Emergence of self-advocacy

From the discussion so far, we can see that the advocacy work of different people has been very important for persons with intellectual disability in Malta to experience improvements in their lives. But we have also seen that advocacy on its own is not enough and that self-advocacy is essential.

The self-advocacy of persons with intellectual disability in Malta is one of the most recent developments. Like the other developments we have discussed, it was started by people who do not have an intellectual disability. But there is a very important difference between these developments and self-advocacy. With self-advocacy, other people worked directly to promote the voice of persons with intellectual disability. This way they could have more control over their lives. We can see this, for example, in the way that the self-advocacy group Grupp Flimkien Naslu was formed: It was persons with intellectual disability who set up this group—after they had attended a course in public-speaking skills organised by nondisabled people.

Listening to what persons with intellectual disability have to say is important for all the areas of life that we have discussed. It is important so that they can say where they would like to live, with who and how. It is important so that they can say what they want out of their education and their employment. It is important so that they can say how they would like to develop their talents and spend their free time. And it is important so that they can say who they would like to spend their time with.

When persons with intellectual disability can make themselves heard, they can be treated with respect because they show that they are able to reflect about their lives, make choices and express opinions. Persons with intellectual disability should not give up on trying to make their voice heard. But it is also the responsibility of other people to take time to listen to what persons with intellectual disability have to say and to take it seriously. It is also their responsibility to provide persons with intellectual disability with the support they need to be able to speak for themselves. This is what self-advocacy is about.

Self-advocacy happens in different places. It happens when persons with intellectual disability meet in their own groups. It happens when they deliver talks to university students and do disability equality training. It also happens when family members and staff support their wishes and choices. And it happens when they are listened to by social workers, therapists and other people who work with them. It is important that persons with intellectual disability can open their heart to someone they feel safe with and who treats them with respect. It is therefore very important that parents, workers and benefactors continue their work to make the lives of persons with intellectual disability better. Now that these persons have shown how much they are capable of achieving and how capable they are of being self-advocates, it is also important that this study is carried out with them.

“Dare to love”

As explained above, as part of our discussion we viewed the video “Dare to Love” (Department of Disability Studies, 2021). In this video, three performers with intellectual disability read poems they had written about love. Karl talks about his love for his girlfriend, and Mark and Sarah talk about their love for each other. All three also talk about their love for other persons and these persons' love for them. These are the lines from the three poems that we liked most and our thoughts about them:

From Karl's Poem:

“Love—when a person talks to me”

“Love is caring”

“I love everyone”

From Sarah's Poem:

“I feel safe with the people I love”

“Love is about caring, being kind. It is reserved for special people such as my family, my friends and, of course, my fiancé”

From Mark's Poem:

“Love is about respect”

“Love is giving of our hearts to others”

“Happiness is to love and to be loved”

We should all love each other. It is important that the people we are with show us they love us by respecting us and making us feel safe with them, for example, family, friends, fiancés, coworkers, those who provide services and people we meet when we are out. We would like people to talk to us to know us better. That way they can learn about what we are able to do. People show us respect when they talk to us and do not try to shut us up or stay away from us. We care for others. For example, if one of our friends is in hospital, we call them every day and visit them when we can. We take care of people who need our help. It is important to have special people in your life and to be a special person for some people. The most important words are “I love you” and we say them to our family, our genuine friends and all those who show us love and respect and listen to us.

Personal reflections

Anne-Marie

In this article, we have spoken about a lot of good work that has improved the lives of people with intellectual disability in Malta. This study has mostly been done by parents, professionals and benefactors who have advocated for persons with intellectual disability.

This study was important because different services were created that enabled these persons to develop their abilities and achieve a lot. Persons with intellectual disability have shown that—in the right circumstances—they can speak up for themselves, make choices and take decisions, form relationships with others, continue learning, work and participate in different activities. Therefore, it is essential that any work in the present and in the future is done together with persons with intellectual disability and starts with what they say that they need and would like to achieve in their lives.

Isabel

I think it is very important that people do not overprotect persons with intellectual disability. When a person is overprotected, they do not have the opportunity to speak up and make their voice heard. It is important to have meetings with parents and with those who work with persons with intellectual disability so that they learn more about self-advocacy. Persons with intellectual disability should also learn more about self-advocacy. There should be meetings about self-advocacy which are led by persons with intellectual disability and by those who provide them with support. That way, parents, workers and persons with intellectual disability can learn about the importance of self-advocacy and how it can help persons with intellectual disability have a better life.

Brian

I live at Dar tal-Providenza and for me it is important that people realise that we are persons just like everybody else. I would like to tell people to come to Dar tal-Providenza to get to know us. Some people think that this is an impossible thing to do but this is not true. People should not rely on what others say. They should come and see for themselves. They should meet us and talk with us. I would like to speak to as many people as possible. It is important that we continue doing self-advocacy work so that people get to know us: students, social workers, educators, health professionals, people working in different places and other people as well.

Conclusion

When we reflected on what we had written, we discussed the most important points. Isabel and Brian said that these were: the need for support, positive attitudes from others and knowing what persons with intellectual disability want. The following poem is based on their thoughts on these three important subjects.

Support is very important:

From our parents and families

From those who provide services for us

From our coworkers

From tutors in the arts and sport coaches

From our organisations

From our friends.

Support encourages us.

It makes a positive difference in our lives:

To learn with other students

To work

To spend time with those we like

To train in a sport

To express ourselves in the arts

To say what we would like and take decisions

Not to have overprotection

To develop our abilities and show what we are capable of

To teach others about our lives.

How other people look at us is also important:

In schools, disabled children should all be accepted

At work, disabled persons should be accepted too

and when we go out too.

Other people should not:

Avoid us

Pity us

Call us "handicapped"

or think that we remain children.

They should speak to us to know us better:

We want to continue learning.

We want other people speak to us.

We want other people listen to us.

We want to have persons who help us do what we would like to do.

We want more love.

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