

Disabled? How far were people with learning disabilities included in the societies they lived in?

Contents:

This teacher guide.

Booklet.

PowerPoint.

Teacher guide

Thank you for considering teaching this enquiry. People with learning disabilities have been and still are amongst the most marginalised groups in human society. They are entitled to have their history heard. They have been the subject of comparatively little interest from mainstream culture or scholarship, although it is heartening to see this seems to be changing.

I have been a history teacher for many years and fully understand how busy curriculum is. I take no issue with any teacher deciding this enquiry is not an appropriate option for their setting. It is my hope even if this is the case you would still find the booklet interesting and revealing.

This enquiry is focused on change and continuity around the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Time should be spent in each lesson on this with emphasis placed on the idea inclusion and exclusion are not binaries and there are exceptions to what may seem the dominant one of these in every time period.

A table along the lines of the one below might be helpful to keep thinking centred on the themes of the enquiry, which could be kept by pupils and filled in at the end of each period.

Period	Evidence for inclusion	Evidence for exclusion	Change or continuity?
Prehistoric era			
Ancient era			
Medieval and early modern period.			
18 th century			
19 th century			
20 th century			
Modern day			

If this teacher guidance is followed assessments will probably work best centred on change and continuity - for example an essay answering the question “To what extent did eugenics change the way people with learning disabilities were included in society?”

The enquiry can be taught as a discrete unit or the lessons can be ‘detached’ and interleaved in an existing curriculum.

If pressed for time the section on the prehistoric period could be omitted but the material on the ancient world should be taught as latter material around eugenics builds on themes that begin here.

I respectfully request this enquiry is not attached to work on the history of medicine. People with learning disabilities are not ill and have been medicalised quite enough.

Great sensitivity is required to frame this properly. Please do not skip the introduction and allow time for children to ask questions about the words used. Insults around intellectual capacity are very mainstream and sadly still considered socially acceptable in many contexts. Teachers may need to spend some time with pupils talking about this before teaching this enquiry and may rightfully decide some children may not yet be ready to study this topic.

Core knowledge can be found the lesson-by-lesson breakdown below which may be useful for retrieval practise and ensuring the thread of the unit does not get lost in all the fascinating hinterland.

The focus questions on the PowerPoint are centred on the core knowledge. These could be tackled through discussion or written work. The words to check understanding of have contextual meanings that shift over time so these words may need periodically revisiting.

Core knowledge

Lesson 1

Why learn the history of people with learning disabilities?

People have learning disabilities for different reasons.

People with learning disabilities are made vulnerable when they are not included in societies.

Learning disability is comparative and how it is defined has changed over time.

The study of people with learning disabilities can reveal much about what a society values and cares about.

The history of people with learning disabilities is all our history.

The words used to describe people with learning disabilities are sensitive and great care must be taken when using them

Lesson 2

How far were people with learning disabilities included in the prehistoric period?

It is difficult to learn about people in the prehistoric period because it was a long time ago and their lifestyles meant little evidence has been left behind.

Prehistoric lifestyles were very demanding and a learning disability may have been difficult to manage.

A skull which suggests a child may have had a learning disability may offer evidence they were included in their society even though their ability to physically contribute may have been compromised.

Lesson 3

Did Ancient societies exclude people with learning disabilities?

There is more evidence from Ancient Greece and Rome but it still hard to know much about people with learning disabilities because little was written about them.

Both Ancient Greek and Roman public rhetoric was exclusive towards people with learning disabilities. Any 'imperfection' was regarded as grounds to kill a baby.

Some people with learning disabilities may have blended in with everyone else as fewer people were literate and less complicated occupations were more common than they are today.

The spread of Christianity may have resulted in a more inclusive attitude towards people with disabilities.

Eventually infanticide was banned for all reason even in the Roman Empire.

Lesson 4

How fully were people with learning disabilities included in the medieval and early modern period?

Many medieval and early modern behaviours and attitudes were driven by the bible, which taught vulnerable people should be protected.

People with learning disabilities were the responsibility of their communities. They would only be placed in institutions if nobody else could support them.

As in the ancient world many people we would regard as having learning disabilities today may have blended into the general population.

Infants who did not develop typically could be described as changelings.

Adopting 'innocent fools' into a noble family or royal court was common. The experience of these people varied but there is plenty of evidence they were cared for and had some influence.

Lesson 5

What do Fanny and Thomas' stories reveal about how far people with learning disabilities were included in 18th century society?

People with learning disabilities could be vulnerable in 18th century society and people tried to take advantage of this.

People with learning disabilities were often protected by their families and in their communities.

There was a societal acceptance the legal system had a duty to protect the interests of people with learning disabilities and adjustments were sometimes made where the law did not formally do this.

Lesson 6

Why did 19th and 20th century societies lock away people with learning disabilities?

Charles Darwin's ideas reinforced existing ideas about the Great Chain of Being and resulted in increasing belief those with learning disabilities were unimprovable and had no role to play in society.

These ideas were also applied to racialised views of human beings in other parts of the world.

Exclusionary attitudes towards people with learning disabilities led to their separation and exclusion in hospitals, asylums and colonies.

The disappearance of those with learning disabilities from every day life made them more vulnerable.

Lesson 7

Why did some societies in the 20th century try to get rid of people with learning disabilities?

Beliefs in people with learning disabilities being unimprovable resulted in the flowering of eugenics societies, which were became part of mainstream scientific and public culture.

Existing societal exclusion of people with learning disabilities resulted in people more readily accepting ideas they did not have the same emotions as others and would be better off not existing.

Eugenic ideas were most fully expressed in Nazi Germany where thousands were sterilised and murdered.

Lesson 8

Back into the community?
How included are people with learning disabilities now?

The collapse in mainstream support for eugenics as a result of Nazi atrocities was replaced by mainstream indifference.

Many people in existing institutions were transferred to NHS hospitals.

Society expected parents of children with learning disabilities to institutionalise them.

Conditions in NHS hospitals were brutal and a series of scandals shocked the public.

Campaigning parents and their children fought to change attitudes.

Policies of exclusion gave way to inclusive policies.

There is still a long way to go.

Thanks

I am enormously indebted to Doctor Simon Jarrett and Stephen Unwin for their kindness, rigour and unfailing support.

I'd also like to thank Simon Knight, Jasmine Lane, Matt Burnage, Rachael Paget, Richard Kennett, Ben Walsh, James Handscombe, Doctor Rose Sawyer, Professor Suzannah Lipscomb, Lee Hill and Kristian Shanks for your help.

It's much better than it was because of you.

Any omissions, mistakes or are of course my own.

Thanks to Shaun Webster MBE for encouraging me and for helping me with ideas on making this more accessible and how we might expand this into a proper project. Can't wait to make it happen!

Special thanks to Oliver Caviglioli for cleaning up my formatting and making this readable.

Further reading:

All further reading can be found in the footnotes in the booklet.

For both my children, Bessie and Rose. Different. Perfectly Human.