

New Perspectives in the Research of Special Education and Disability History in Hungary

KATA HODÁSZ

Abstract

The study presents the significant literature in the fields of Hungarian special education and disability history, with particular focus on theoretical and methodological developments. The aim of the comparative analysis is to explore the growing prevalence of interdisciplinary historical analyses which are increasingly shaped by social and cultural historical orientations. This reconsideration of historical perspectives allows for examining the social status, identity, and evolving educational and rehabilitative approaches affecting individuals with disabilities. The study summarizes several methodological considerations applied in the examination of disability and special education history such as the period-specific analysis of concepts and the exploration of intersections between institutional education and everyday life.

Keywords: history of disability; history of special education; social history; cultural history context; interdisciplinary approach; research methodology

Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL: Social Sciences – Education – History of Education

DOI: 10.36007/eruedu.2025.1.028-037

Introduction

This study aims to provide an overview of the significant literature in Hungarian special education and disability history, without aspiring to be exhaustive. Its goal is to offer insight into the theoretical and methodological approaches that characterize the interdisciplinary enrichment and development of these fields by reviewing works that undertake historical analyses of disability and the education of individuals with disabilities. The authors and writings presented in this study are notable for their efforts to construct a comprehensive historical reconstruction of the social and cultural perceptions of disability in relation to education. These works are remarkable not only for their theoretical foundations and interdisciplinary diversity but also for their methodological approaches. The methodologies applied in reconstructing the history of disability serve as essential resources for professionals preparing to work with the education of children with disabilities, as well as for researchers in the field.

Social history orientation in Hungarian research on the history of education

More and more authors of historiographical analyses of pedagogical history draw attention to the fact that in the field of international and Hungarian research on the history of pedagogy, there has been a significant transformation in the research themes, the theoretical background and the methods of reconstruction since the 1960s (Cohen & Depaepe 1996; Depaepe & Simon 1996; Tenorth 1997; Németh 2010). The consequence of this shift in research attitudes and theoretical foundations has been a move away from the classical historicist perspective and a simultaneous opening towards inter- and multidisciplinary analyses. This change has been noticeably reflected in the impact of the new results and concepts of social, cultural and postmodern historiography on the historiography of pedagogy (Németh 2010, 149-150). In the history of pedagogical history in Hungary in the 20th century, the demand for a method of processing embedded in a broader cultural-historical context appeared at the end of the 20th century, Hungarian researchers turned towards new historical frontiers, and the paradigm shift in history brought to the fore the approach of educational phenomena from a social-historical perspective (Németh 2002).

Increasing emphasis has been placed on understanding the different aspects of education and training as a complex phenomenon embedded in the social reality of a given age. As a result, historians of education are moving beyond the traditional themes of the discipline, such as public education, the history of institutional education and education policy, to a greater interest in the minutiae of everyday life, the micro-histories of individual life trajectories, and the changes in childhood, adolescence, family life and the adult world¹. (Németh 2002) Many issues of the history of everyday life have been brought within the problematic and theoretical horizons of the history of education. From this period onwards, the focus of attention of the authors has increasingly turned to the inner life of schools of the old times, the development of human relations, interpersonal relationships and pedagogical spaces.

It can be seen, therefore, that international and Hungarian research in the history of education has undergone a significant transformation, as a result of which, in addition to moving away from traditional approaches, there has been an increasing emphasis on inter- and multidisciplinary approaches. This shift in approach has been accompanied by the need to interpret educational phenomena in their social context, thus promoting a deeper understanding of different aspects of educational history. This thematic and methodological enrichment and broadening of horizons is not only evident in the history of education in general but is also increasingly present in the history of special education and in the history of disability studies,

¹ A phenomenon related to this paradigm shift is that researchers in the history of education no longer focus exclusively on children growing up in average or ordinary circumstances, but also investigate the historical processes of the education of disadvantaged children belonging to minority social groups (Németh 2002, 14).

which is less than two decades old. Researchers are pushing the boundaries of educational history and adopting new historical approaches in their work.

Interpretation of disability and special education history

Before presenting the literature on the history of special education and the history of disability in Hungary, it is essential to review how the two fields branch out, what different interpretative frameworks, perspectives and methods are offered and applied in the historical approach to the life, education and teaching of persons with disabilities. The difference between the history of disability and the history of special education is essentially due to the perspectives used in the study of the history of disability and related social, cultural and educational phenomena, and the length of the period under study.

Disability history is the discipline of disability studies that focuses on disability as a social and cultural construct, and on understanding how norms, values and attitudes to disability have evolved and changed over historical time. Research can focus on how different periods have shaped the social status, legal status and identity of people with disabilities. Furthermore, disability history analyses the social structures, moments and hidden ways of functioning that have influenced the exclusion or inclusion of people with disabilities. (Könczei, Antal & Kolonics 2016, 2)

The aim of research on the history of special education, on the other hand, is to explore the interrelationships and laws of the history of curative education, to examine the impact of historical events, turning points and personalities that have determined its development, and to help in the planning of the special education process (Gordosné Szabó 1997). We can see that while the history of disability analyses the perception of disability and the situation of disabled people from a social and cultural perspective, the history of special education focuses on the historical development of educational and rehabilitation approaches, presenting the pedagogical and institutional aspects of the phenomenon of disability.

The thought of Anna Gordosné Szabó (1978) give us an idea of the method we should use in our historical research when we attempt to reconstruct the events affecting disabled people. A particular event or section of the history of disability and special education can only be analysed and evaluated correctly if it is seen in the context of the developmental process and movement of which it is a part. Furthermore, we can only gain an authentic picture of a stage in the history of people with disabilities and special needs education if we consider its specific problems and the laws that have governed its development in accordance with the most general laws of social development. Thus, each historical moment can only be critically evaluated in the context of the laws that determine the development of society. (Gordosné Szabó 1978)

Research methodological considerations for research on the history of disability and special education

As early as 1933, Zoltán Tóth (1883–1940) provided a guide to the historical approach to the education of handicapped children, since he systematized the questions that could be included in the history of special education, and the aspects and order in which they could be synthesized. According to his research methodology, if the history of special needs education is to be written as a coherent whole, it is necessary to break with the thinking applied to groups and to examine the development of universal issues relating to the education of children with disabilities: *“This work must therefore be such as to make it possible to know the course of development of curative education as applied to groups, in relation to the education and training of individuals with disabilities; secondly, it must be such as to include knowledge of the development of social activity in the history of curative education, that is to say, it must deal with the history of the prevention of disabilities and the development of legal, social and economic protection.”* (Tóth 1933, 264) According to him, it is only possible to describe the development of universal special education thought, its most essential moments, when the historical development focusing on the education and teaching of different types of disabilities, prevention, social, legal and economic protection is before us. Only after these antecedents can we describe the process of the development of theories and practices directed at disabled children and the development of ideas about the development of universal issues in special education, and then the history of institutions (Tóth 1933). Zoltán Tóth’s ideas already reflect an openness to interdisciplinary analyses in the research topic, in the theoretical background and in the methods used, and call for a foundation in social history and cultural history.

In 1982, Svetluše Solarová summarised the increasing difficulties that researchers face in writing about the history of the education of disabled children in general. The author has synthesised her ideas in relation to the overall history of special needs education, but we can also see these difficulties when looking at individual areas. The need to educate people with disabilities and their pedagogy as a scientific discipline is not an old one, so it can be difficult to understand and describe it without distortions. A coordinated, coherent approach is made difficult by the interdisciplinary interaction that is a specific feature of special needs education. These disciplines - such as philosophy, anthropology, theology, sociology and many medical disciplines - are not fundamentally part of pedagogy, but it is inevitable that the interfaces between these disciplines are included and analysed in our investigations (Solarová 1982 cited in Bachmann 1992).

György Könczei, in the first historical chapter of the volume *„A Taigetosztól az esélyegyenlőségig”*, quotes Leo Oppenheim: *„What is needed is a way of looking at things that evaluates the achievements of the past in the context of their own time and does not try to fit them into a comprehensive development scheme at any cost”* (Oppenheim 1977, 373–374, quoted in Könczei 2002: 30). These lines and the above quotations highlight the fact that instead of imposing

developmental patterns, we must strive to preserve the realism of the facts we discover, their embeddedness in everyday processes. If we fail to do so, we will seek answers from a 21st century perspective, using historical parallels to try to explain the issues of the present. In addition, we may look for examples from the past to confirm or refute a particular opinion or theory, which is facilitated by the rich repository of history, since we can find examples for everything. (Magyar 2018) „*Therefore, if we approach an age or culture not with its own values and standards, but with our own presuppositions, we will hardly understand its essence*” (Könczei 2002, 30).

Miklós Köszeghy and Szabolcs Parragh draw attention to further methodological challenges in disability history research. In their view, it is a methodological mistake to try to understand the phenomena of the past on the basis of the conceptual framework and questions of the present. Indeed, before the 19th and 20th centuries there was no “linguistic space” in which society could define the situation of disabled people or their relationship to the majority. „*In a sense, then, we are back to asking the wrong questions when we are interested in the situation of disabled people in the past. Social rejection or support are relations that were institutionally and linguistically unknown until the late modern era.*” (Köszeghy & Parragh 2016, 532) We should therefore refrain from looking for contemporary concepts of special education or disability studies in contemporary sources and projecting current professional concepts and expectations back into the past.

At the same time, Walter Bachmann points out that „*history is never limited to the past, but also includes those whom science is directed at, and thus enables them to reflect on their own. Thus, knowledge of the past fate of the disabled contributes to the understanding of their present situation as something historically happened, something created by people and thus changeable*” (Bachmann 1992, 30-31). Epistemological relativism, the co-existence of many different “truths”, is now accepted in historiography. According to postmodern historiography, the exploration of the past results in a multiplicity of different readings and interpretations, the comparison and reconciliation of which form the historical knowledge that is incorporated into our knowledge of the past (Golnhofer & Szabolcs 2016). The researcher’s present circumstances, his or her vision and current knowledge can help us to develop a differentiated historical perspective that treats the periods under study with respect and due humility.

Recent trends and research topics in the history of disability and special needs education

In Hungarian publications examining the historical aspects of disability and the education of children with disabilities, the need to place them in a cultural-historical context and to be open to border studies has become increasingly emphasised (Magyar 2018). These researches are characterised by an increasingly differentiated approach, which no longer focus exclusively on the historical aspects of

institutional education, but are often located in overlapping fields: among others, the history of curative education, the history of disability, the history of children's age and social history.

One of the first examples of this approach in Hungary in the field of the history of disability is the book by Zsófia Kálmán and György Könczei, titled *„A Taigetosztól az esélyegyenlőségig”*, published in 2002. The historical overview of the volume shows the changes in the perception of people with disabilities from antiquity to the present day, highlighting how social attitudes surrounding disability have evolved. The authors include perspectives from different cultures, religions and historical periods that have contributed to the development of attitudes towards disability. A key element of the volume is also an analysis of the evolution of disability policies in the 20th century, with a particular focus on the strengthening of human rights perspectives and international efforts to achieve equal treatment.

In the first chapter of the book by Zsófia Kálmán and György Könczei, we read: *„In the long term, the task will be to reconstruct the social status of people with disabilities, the reasons for their disability, whether they were able to work, marry, have children, the extent to which they were separated from society, what happened to severely disabled children, and so on. When we started this research, there were hardly any publications on this subject. Nowadays, there is work on these issues in many parts of the world, but it will take generations of joint work to get a much clearer picture than we have at present. What is most striking even today is the almost complete lack of literature on the history of disability.”* (Könczei 2002, 29) In her doctoral dissertation (2017), Emese Berzsényi cites *„Disability History Konstruktionen von Behinderung in der Geschichte: Die Einführung”* (2010), edited by Elisabeth Bösl, Anne Klein and Anne Waldschmidt, as a source that shades the gaps in European research on disability history. According to the volume, disability history has only recently become a new discipline of historiography in the Anglo-Saxon context (Bösl 2010 cited in Berzsényi 2017, 11-12).

An example of the interdisciplinary approach is the volume of studies *„Tággabb értelemben vett gyógypedagógia”* edited by Péter Zászkalický and Tamás Verdes, first published in 2004, which is of importance beyond the field of education: it presents perspectives from history, literary history, art history, philosophy history and religious history, among others. In addition to providing insights into the (historical) concept and dimensions of disability from different disciplines, it also allows the disciplines to examine the issue through their own problem horizons, going beyond the narrow understanding of education and special education, and is thought-provoking for researchers in special education and disability history. *„The boundaries of special education in the broader sense are defined by disciplines in which the phenomenon of disability, as a central category of special education, is generally marginalised and usually only comes into the field of research as a result of interdisciplinary links with the science of remedial education”* (Zászkalický & Verdes 2016, 11). The aim of this volume is therefore not only to explore disability in the context of remedial education, but also to place it in a broader context. In this way, the phenomenon of disability becomes an object of

study in academic disciplines where it is traditionally less present. This approach can be a stimulus for the history of special education and disability, and even for the social sciences, to bring new perspectives to the understanding and analysis of different aspects of disability. The volume is a thought-provoking stimulus for researchers to explore the concept and phenomenon of disability within a broader, less conventional scientific framework. These comprehensive approaches not only enrich knowledge in special education but can also generate new syntheses in understanding the history of disability and its perception in society.

Katalin Kéri (2010) draws attention to the fact that in researching the history of education, it is necessary to understand the universal history of education from a broad perspective. In every historical period and place, people are both the product and the shaper of the historical process, as well as the creator of pedagogical ideas (Kéri 2010). In this respect, the work of Emese Berzsenyi is of fundamental and pioneering importance in the research of the history of disability, since no work of this kind was previously known not only in Hungarian literature, but also in the literature of the Anglo-Saxon and German-speaking worlds, which summarised the history of disability and the education of disabled people from a similar perspective.² The author of *„Kiválasztott vagy megbélyegzett? – Tanítások a fogyasztékoságról: a zsidóság, a kereszténység és az iszlám szent könyvei szerint”* was published in 2020 as a monograph for her doctoral thesis. The volume presents a comparative religious history of the life and education of persons with disabilities from the teachings of the Abrahamic religions, providing insights into their attitudes and teachings on disability. Anna Gordosné Szabó (1978) points out that there are few sources available on the treatment of disabled people and attempts to deal with them up to the Middle Ages, since few sources provide information on everyday life in prehistoric and ancient societies. The importance of this volume is therefore demonstrated by the fact that it presents the lives, social status and educational opportunities of people with disabilities in a contextual and chronological context, sometimes structured according to the type of disability, which traces the most important task of the scriptures, that of social teaching on disability. The historical field of the research moves from the prehistoric introduction to the ancient period with occasional commentaries on the early Middle Ages.

Continuing historical research in 2024, Emese Berzsenyi's book titled *“Bűnös vagy ártatlan? – Az európai középkor fogyasztékoságtörténete”* (Berzsenyi, 2024a) was published. In this case, the researcher of the history of education, special education and disability has in her hands a work that is inescapable in many respects. On the one hand, it is also striking how the interpretation of disability is embedded in the social, economic and religious contexts of the time, which are also described in detail in the book – providing a valuable source for border studies; on the other hand, in a world of writings reporting on the results of scientific research, its clear language and comprehensible structure are sometimes surprisingly effective. The volume is an outstanding example of the interdisciplinary

² Her studies outside the more narrowly understood history of disability contribute to the understanding of the universal history of education (see for example Berzsenyi 2014, 2015).

approach mentioned in the introduction to this paper, since it draws attention to environmental factors (see the chapter on „*A középkor életvilága és ebben a fogyatékos személyek helyzete, lehetőségei*”) in addition to religious, philosophical, anthropological and cultural connections.³

An example of the connection between classical social sciences and the history of childhood, the history of mentality, the history of everyday life and historical iconography is provided by Adél Magyar's doctoral thesis defended in the spring of 2017 at the Education and Society Doctoral School of Education of the University of Pécs, and the resulting volume „*Fejezetek az értelmifogyatékoság-kép történetéből*” (2018).⁴ The central theme of the investigation was to explore how the social image of children and adults with intellectual disabilities developed and changed, with particular attention to the perspectives of childhood and the history of mentalities, from the image of individuals in the ancient Near East and antiquity up to the end of the 19th century. The volume provides an insight into the perspectives on people with intellectual disabilities in different historical periods and cultures, and the roles and social status attributed to them by contemporary communities. The author provides a comprehensive historical perspective that goes beyond the mere presentation of facts. The book addresses the social and medical discourses of the time, giving the reader an insight into how intellectual disability was shaped by the ideologies of different periods. Of particular interest is the way in which the author explores the duality of confinement and cure, showing society's exclusionary and inclusive approaches and how these attitudes have changed under different historical and social influences.

Conclusion

This paper serves as an introduction to a larger, ongoing academic project and aims to present new Hungarian directions and theoretical and methodological frameworks in the study of disability and special education history. Since the mid-20th century, the discipline of educational history has undergone transformation, reflecting an interest in social history perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches which is also evident in the examination of events impacting the lives of people with disabilities. The monographs cited above highlight innovative aspects in the study of disability and special education history (such as the analysis of social and environmental contexts) and are essential for modern research approaches, while theoretical and methodological innovations provide an opportunity for a broader understanding of the phenomenon and history of disability.

³ Further studies of the author related to the period are Berzsenyi 2024b.

⁴ For further studies on this topic, see for example Magyar 2019, 2020.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the University Research Scholarship Programme (EKÖP) of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

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