

# Children With Disabilities: Deconstructing Myths with Social Realities

**Dr. B. Geetha**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology  
School of Social Sciences, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai*

**OPEN ACCESS**

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: September

Year: 2024

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Received: 25.08.2024

Accepted: 17.09.2024

Published: 27.09.2024

Citation:

Geetha, B., and Asish Dineshan. "Children With Disabilities: Deconstructing Myths with Social Realities." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S1, 2024, pp. 106–11

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS1-Sep.8183>

**Asish Dineshan**

*Research Scholar, Department of Sociology  
School of Social Sciences, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai*

## Abstract

*Children with disabilities (CwDs) are indeed more vulnerable than adults when it comes to coping with the ableist beliefs of society. They face unique challenges in addressing ableism because of their age, dependence, and developmental stage. The prevalent myths and misconceptions surrounding CwDs, have doubled their challenges and adversely affected their social inclusion, development, and well-being. The paper explores some of these myths and misconceptions related to Children with Disabilities, as well as their actual social perception. For the study, five common myths were selected, and they were thoroughly analyzed. The paper provides a comprehensive understanding of the reality behind the myths and the challenges they face due to these myths and misconceptions. Also, the paper calls for a shift in social attitudes and stresses the need to replace these harmful myths with a fact-based understanding of disability.*

**Keywords:** Children with Disabilities, Myths and Misconceptions, Ableism, Social Inclusion

## Introduction

The disability cannot be restricted to just an individual's physical or mental impairments, it can be defined as a difficulty and exclusion that come to light because of the interaction between the impairments of the individual and socially created barriers. What truly makes them disabled? Is it their physical or mental impairment? It actually happens when a society fails to accommodate their rights and needs (Michalko, 2002). This highlights the importance of addressing the social factors that contribute to the social neglect and exclusion of Children with disabilities (CwDs) to participate fully in society and achieve their full potential. Persons with Disabilities represent the largest minority group in the world (United Nations) and among them, the CwDs are the most vulnerable group. However, their rights and needs are not recognized on a global scale (Quinn & Degener, 2002). One of the significant reasons contributing to this neglect is the underlying myths and misconceptions within society about disability.

While there has been a slow-growing awareness and acceptance of Children with Disabilities in recent times, myths and misconceptions

still persist. These inaccurate social perceptions not only contribute to the social challenges faced by these children but also hinder their ability to participate in various aspects of their lives. These myths are prevalent throughout history, from ancient Greece's abandonment of disabled infants in the wilderness to forced sterilization, eugenics and other atrocities in the contemporary world are the results of these negative social perceptions (Marini, 2017). In many cultures, disabilities are not viewed through a social, medical, or scientific point of view but are instead viewed as supernatural causes. These myths again and again suggest that disabilities arise from, witchcraft, divine punishment, ancestral curses, or other mystical forces (Setume, 2016). These myths are deeply rooted in various cultures in the world and their impacts are very deep, contributing to stigma and discrimination against CwDs and their families. Many of the children or their parents/ caregivers face negative attitudes because of the myths, which may lead parents or caregivers to seek institutionalization for their children out of fear of societal judgment (Goldman et al., 2020). These myths and misconceptions are not only a social issue but also manifest in many practical challenges in the life of CwDs, such as discrimination in education, healthcare, etc. For example, CwDs often report being rejected from certain educational programmes due to misconceptions about their capabilities, which further perpetuates their marginalization in society.

This paper seeks to explore some of these deeply rooted myths and misconceptions surrounding CwDs, along with the societal perceptions created by these myths and misconceptions. Despite the existence of different programmes and policies aimed at supporting children with disabilities, the realities they encounter often directly contrast with the ideals of inclusion and acceptance. By critically examining the gap between perception and reality, the paper aims to highlight how these perceptions continuously hinder the full inclusion and development of CwDs.

Several myths and misconceptions about CwDs persist in society. These beliefs not only impact how they are treated but also shape policies, practices, and the opportunities available to them. Below, the paper discusses some of the most common myths and their implications.

### **Disability is More a Private than a Social Issue**

Public and private spheres are the spaces where individuals' dwell. Certain aspects of life, such as family, home, and so on, are deemed private, where the individual enjoys a degree of autonomy and the intrusion of other social institutions is minimal. Usually, individuals assign an act as private when they perceive it as an outcome of their personal acts and failures. When people are not ready to discuss or disclose things with others, they are considered private. This may be because of the feeling of marginalization or stigmatization if it is revealed. When the person is not ready to allow others into their space which they consider personal also termed as private. All that is perceived as private may not be private in the fullest sense because the role of society in it also has the accountability and responsibility towards it.

In that sense, disability is viewed as more personal and private. Parents who have children with disability or who need special care are looked down on by society as parents with normal children are viewed as blessed. This attitude is one reason for considering it as a private affair and at times forces the parents to hide the disability of the children in the public sphere to avoid unnecessary issues. The stigma attached to it did not allow the parents to move comfortably in the social sphere, especially for the parents of mentally ill children who face a higher degree of stigmatization in comparison with other disability. There are occurrences where they are ready to miss them in the census enumeration.

Even when conceptually viewing disability, one important way of perceiving it is individual. The scope of the issue is mostly untouched by social, political, and economic influences. In the initial years of the evolution of the concept and knowledge related to disability, it was viewed as

a private affair and dealt with the family, kinship, and religious front. The interpretation of the religion was even related to 'sin' where it was specifically private. Mainly disability was viewed as a family responsibility. Awareness and sensitization were created regarding the social aspects related to disability. Like other discriminations, marginalizations, and exclusions in society were addressed disability was also moved from the private sphere to the public or social sphere where the responsibility and the accountability of other social institutions are involved in understanding the issue and addressing it with the Government plans and policies for their welfare. Still, there is a need to overcome this myth by understanding the construct of disability in more of a private space because the role of political, economic, and social institutions is not recognized as that of family and kin. The internalization of the stigma at the individual and the societal level is to be cracked and broken for the betterment of the disabled particularly the children with disabilities.

### **Special Schools are the only Option for CwDs**

Education is considered one of the important tools for social change in all aspects, whether at the individual, community, or societal level. In the same way, empowering Children with Disability or children with special needs access to education is significant. CwDs are the one who needs special care but it is to be understood whether only special schools can educate them. Special schools are the centers for learning where children with special educational needs are met. For instance, if the child has an issue with vision if the education is provided in Braille, then it is a special coaching for the child. In that case, there are several options and possibilities for the CwDs to get special education from special schools.

The choice for kids with a disability to opt for special education is the welcoming note. Still, it is to be discussed that only special schools can educate them by discriminating against them though they can cope. Special schools are the only option for CwDs are a myth. This view can be confronted with the views from the Salamanca Statement 1994 on Special Needs education. The very idea of the statement was Education for All and the need to promote inclusive education. UNESCO in the event of celebrating inclusion in Education: 30th Anniversary of Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO 2024), in the process of inclusion, each and every learner is to be treated and valued equally. Promotion of inclusion should be transformational and not to be structural, or functional in terms of organisation and technique also there should be a paradigm shift with a movement in a clear philosophical direction in the practice of education. Inclusiveness as a process in education must be brought into the values, and thinking, which can be internalized in culture through substantial transformations in the classrooms and schools (Ainscow et.al 2019). CwDs should also have space in ordinary schooling where major reforms are expected with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (ibid 671).

The idea of inclusive education is to overcome the denial of the right to education on various aspects like poverty, region, gender, language, disability, ethnicity, migration, or displacement. If the CwDs can cope with the students of the normal stream irrespective of the handicap more inclusive education is expected. This is to be promoted in the classrooms with needed care and infrastructure. Though special education classes and schools are there for the CwDs it does not mean that only those schools cater to their needs. Regular schools can have provisions to train any student. Special schools enhance the life of the CwDs and empower them to face society confidently. Skills learned from special schools boost their worth and value which is much needed. Thus, special schools are not the only means for the CwDs rather they improve their quality of life if trained there.

### **CwDs cannot Learn as well as Others**

The belief in society that CwDs cannot learn as well as others is mainly because of the prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions. Early identification of the disability and prompt intervention, along with proper preschool education, are crucial for the development of CwDs. During their initial years, children develop cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically, developing the foundation for their future (UNICEF, 2023). Preschool education gives a strong foundation for developing essential skills, such as communication, social interaction, and self-care for them. Moreover, Goal 4 of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to provide more inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all the people including CwDs.

If the social system gives all the support for them, they can achieve their full potential. In National Guidelines and Implementation Framework on Equitable and Inclusive Education developed by the Department of Education of Groups with Special Needs (DEGSN) and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) points out that the learning process of CwDs are hindered by many social challenges like not identifying their learning needs, negative stereotypes, insufficient qualified teachers, inadequate teaching materials, infrastructural limitations, limited use of technology inaccessible support systems. Giving proper play time, teaching everyday activities, and providing an accessible, inclusive, and supportive environment will help the children to thrive (UNICEF, 2023).

### **CwDs should be Treated Differently to Protect them**

The misconception that Children with Disabilities should be treated differently to protect them is often based on well-intentioned but it is a wrong belief in the society. The lives of many CwDs are often shaped by the experience of overprotection, particularly when they are cared for by family members (Hemm, Dagnan & Meyer, 2017). This overprotection can stem from a genuine desire to safeguard them from harm or social stigma. However, this overprotection can inadvertently restrict the individual's opportunities for growth and independence. This tends to lead very structured lives, which limits their ability to develop skills, engage in social relationships, and participate in community activities (Callus et al., 2019). This creates a dependence on others, particularly family members, and prevents them from living a life in their own interests (Callus et al., 2019). This overprotection is rooted in prejudice, which is a negative attitude or belief about children based on their disability. Janardhana, Muralidhar, Naidu, and Raghavendra (2015) mention that overprotection is more pronounced for girls with disabilities than boys with disabilities, they face additional societal pressures, also, parents may prioritize the boy's education and opportunities while viewing their daughters as lifelong burdens, especially after reaching puberty.

Therefore, treating them differently to protect them is a false belief and it has significant implications that can adversely affect their development, social integration, and overall well-being. This may lead to social isolation, preventing them from forming friendships and social networks, which can result in feelings of loneliness and rejection. Instead of overprotection, there is a need for a supportive and empowering approach that helps to develop their independence and inclusion.

### **CwDs are a Burden on their Family and Society**

This is a stereotypical myth, that arises from a lack of understanding and awareness about an individual's capabilities and potential. Contrary to this myth, they can lead a fulfilling life and make valuable contributions to their family as well as society when given the proper support and accommodations as others (Edmonds, 2005). Families with lower socioeconomic status have limited financial resources, which makes it difficult to access proper healthcare, education services, and day-to-day needs necessary for the child's development and well-being. This economic strain

which is a part of society can lead to increased stress and feelings of burden within the family and society (Kuhlthau et al., 2005). We are significantly overlooking the structural barriers that the children with disability and their families face in society and only focusing on the characteristics of a child's ability to judge the children and families to make the harmful notation that disability is a burden on the families and society (Bixby, 2023).

Societal attitudes and systematic barriers are one of the main reasons for the challenges of families raising CwDs. Negative social views can result in discrimination, limited access to resources, and a lack of understanding. Additionally, physical environments are not designed with accessibility in mind, limiting the independence and opportunities of CwDs. Financial hardships such as medical expenses can further worsen these challenges. Moreover, support services from governmental and non-governmental institutions like early interventions, healthcare, and education becoming difficult to access and insufficient too. By shifting the focus of society from individual characteristics to broader social factors, it will be easy to understand that CwDs are not a burden for their families and society, the societal factors are the challenges for them and portray them as a burden.

### **Conclusion**

Children with Disabilities face substantial challenges in terms of social inclusion, development, and well-being due to widespread myths and misconceptions about them and their disability. Based on cultural ideas and biases, these myths and misconceptions frequently spread unfavourable attitudes and discrimination in society. Despite the advances in knowledge and various inclusive policies and programmes, misconceptions about CwDs continue to hinder their inclusion in society. This paper has explored five common myths that are prevalent in society and contribute to the difficulties faced by CwDs. These beliefs are frequently founded on preconceptions and assumptions, rather than facts. Historically the disability is viewed through a lens of personal responsibility and ignores the social, economic, and political dimensions of disability. Later emergence of the social model of disability questions this view and rewrites the definition of disability. The views like special schools are the only option for CwDs are based on outdated beliefs that hinder the inclusion of CwDs in mainstream society. This is also stressed by the Salamanca Statement by UNESCO that they need to integrate into mainstream schooling environments with appropriate accommodations. Inclusive education combats discrimination, builds a generation that treats everyone equally and allows all children to thrive together. Many studies have shown that with the right interventions, CwDs can reach their full potential. Early detection and interventions, as well as inclusive education, are critical in promoting their growth and learning and disproving the harmful myth that they are incapable of learning. Another well-intentioned misconception is that they need to be safeguarded. However, overprotection might restrict their freedom and chances for advancement. The literature has shown that with the right interventions, people with disabilities can make significant contributions to their families and societies and they are not a burden. Challenging these myths and misconceptions is need for the hour for building a more inclusive and equitable society. By promoting positive attitudes, advocating for accessible environments, and, fact-based understanding of disability we can replace these harmful myths and empower CwDs and ensure their full participation in all aspects of their life.

### **References**

1. Bixby L. E. (2023). Disability Is Not a Burden: The Relationship between Early Childhood Disability and Maternal Health Depends on Family Socioeconomic Status. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 64(3), 354–369. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221465231167560>.

2. Business Bliss Consultants FZE. (November 2018). Why is Disability Viewed as a Social Problem?. Retrieved from <https://nursinganswers.net/essays/disability.php?vref=1>.
3. Callus, A. M., Bonello, I., Mifsud, C., & Fenech, R. (2019). Overprotection in the lives of people with intellectual disability in Malta: knowing what is control and what is enabling support. *Disability & Society*, 34(3), 345–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1547186>.
4. Edmonds, Lorna Jean. (2005). Disabled people and development. Philippines: Asian Development Bank.
5. Goldman, P. S., et al. (2020). Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children 2: policy and practice recommendations for global, national, and local actors. *The Lancet. Child & adolescent health*, 4(8), 606–633. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(20\)30060-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30060-2).
6. Hemm, C., Dagnan, D., & Meyer, T. D. (2017). Social anxiety and parental overprotection in young adults with and without intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 31(3), 360–368. doi:10.1111/jar.12413.
7. Janardhana, N., Muralidhar, D., Naidu, D. M., & Raghevendra, G. (2015). Discrimination against differently abled children among rural communities in India: Need for action. *Journal of natural science, biology, and medicine*, 6(1), 7–11. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0976-9668.149070>
8. Kuhlthau, K., Hill, K. S., Yucel, R., & Perrin, J. M. (2005). Financial Burden for Families of Children with Special Health Care Needs. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 9(2), 207–218. doi:10.1007/s10995-005-4870-x.
9. Mel Ainscow, Roger Slee & Marnie Best (2019) Editorial: the Salamanca Statement: 25 years on, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23:7-8, 671-676, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2019.1622800.
10. Marini, I. (2017). The History of Treatment Toward People with Disabilities. In *Psychosocial Aspects of Disability* (pp. 1–32). Springer Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826180636.0001>.
11. Quinn, Gerard., & Degener, Theresia. (2002). *Human Rights and Disability*. New York and Geneva: United Nations.
12. Sanders K. Y. (2006). Overprotection and lowered expectations of persons with disabilities: the unforeseen consequences. *Work* (Reading, Mass.), 27(2), 181–188.
13. Setume, S. D. (2016). Myths and Beliefs About Disabilities: Implications for Educators and Counselors. *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 20(1–2), 62–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2016.1152938>.
14. UNESCO. 1994. Final Report: World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality. Paris: UNESCO.
15. UNICEF. (2023). Helping your child with disabilities thrive. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/helping-your-child-disabilities-thrive>.
16. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/celebrating-inclusion-education-30th-anniversary-salamanca-statement#:~:text=The%20Salamanca%20Statement%20adopted%20and,wherever%20possible%2C%20regardless%20of%20any>.
17. <https://blogs.ubc.ca/alexandria3122/2016/10/17/the-construction-of-disability-as-a-public-issue-rather-than-a-private-trouble/#>.