Voices & Choices: How Education Influences the Career Choices of Young Disabled People

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Abstract

The changing British society, with new commitments to educational inclusion for disabled people, should mean increased individual freedom of choice and greater chance of participation. However, juggling this with the continuing emphasis on education for the economy brings the danger of new forms of social exclusion, of those who do have different needs and require additional support to take advantage of opportunities and make informed decisions about their professional futures. This contradiction encourages the deteriorating academic and career-oriented foresight of special schools and the inclusion of all disabled students in mainstream education, without providing enough support to cater for the diversity and differentiation it generates. This paper adds to this debate by reporting on the work in progress, of a project funded by the European Social Fund, concerning the educational experiences of a group of young disabled people, still in full-time mainstream or special education. It presents some personal accounts of the young people's perceptions of how their educational environment influences their personal aspirations for future careers and post-school choices. This research strives to give a voice to young disabled people, informing policy concerned with young people, education and transitions to work.

Introduction

The transition from school to work has always been a crucial time in the lives of young people. Students became increasingly aware of career opportunities and vocational pathways during their final years of senior school (Harvey, 1984). How and when such transitions are made can have a major impact on the young person's sense of identity, the kind of person they want to be and their view of the world in general (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996).

Furthermore, the individual school coupled with the legislative climate at the time inevitably has significant influence on the young people's transitions. Policy and practice, particularly within the school arena, can either support young people's subjective realities or constrain them. Warton and Cooney (1997) found, in their study, that students were unlikely to make optimal choices as they lack sufficient and appropriate vocational information. Other studies (eg. Ainley *et al.*, 1994) have identified a range of external factors that influence young people's career-related choices within schools. These include type of school, subject availability, timetabling restrictions, choices made by friends and eligibility for entry to further education courses.

Where young people have disabilities and require additional support compared to their peers, the choices available to them in relation to academic subjects and future careers may be severely truncated. Despite the U.K. Government's commitment to remove barriers to learning and increase staff training in mainstream schools so disabled students can be educated alongside their non-disabled peers (Department for Education & Employment, 1997; DFES, 2004), not much progress is apparent at grassroots level. Research suggests disabled children have not been given the same educational opportunities, or been expected to achieve the same, as their non-disabled peers (DRC Disability Briefing, 2000). According to official statistics from the Disability Rights Commission Educational Research study (2002-03), many young disabled people in England and Wales feel marginalised and excluded at mainstream schools. Some young people are not able to access all school resources, and may have to forego certain activities and classes. Furthermore, many feel they received insufficient support in school and are discouraged from taking standard educational qualifications required for university entrance (Martin, 2004).

While a number of studies have explored issues relating to post-school choices of non-disabled young people (eg. Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996; Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2003; Whitely & Porter, 2004) there is a dearth of work about the educational experiences of young disabled people and how their career ambitions are influenced. Further, there is growing recognition that gaining the views of all young people is crucial for understanding issues that affect their lives.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to report on the preliminary findings of a three year research project funded by European Social Fund, on how young disabled people, still in full-time education, perceive that their school environment influences their subject selection, aspirations and career decisions. For the purposes of this work the term 'young disabled people' defines males and females, aged between 13-25, who are in full-time education (in school or FE college) with physical impairments relating to mobility, dexterity and speech.

One of the intended outcomes of the study is to allow the voices of young disabled people to be heard and listened to, informing policy and practice concerning their transitions within school, and from school to occupational adulthood.

Such research is particularly important now, as the UK Government moves to implement new strategies for supporting the transition of young people into work, and recognises the importance of consulting them about what they want, need and feel. The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (DFEE, 2001) states that children have the right to be heard and should be encouraged to participate in any decision-making process to meet their special educational needs (Read & Clements, 2001). Therefore, including their opinions in research about their occupational futures seems particularly timely.

Educational environment

Young disabled people in Britain are less likely than their non-disabled counterparts to pursue academic subjects that facilitate progression to future careers of their choice (Shah, 2005, in press). This is often related to a number of factors connected with disability and how society reacts to it. Burgess (2003) maintained that despite the ongoing policy drive towards inclusion, mainstream schools are not fully accessible, as those responsible for developing inclusion still think of accessibility in terms of ramps and rails. In her study of disabled secondary school students throughout the UK, Burgess found that their curriculum choices were severely curtailed: 36% of young disabled people she talked to could not study subjects of their choice due to poor access to the curriculum and the disabling environment, including attitudes of teachers.

A survey by the UK government's Department of Education and Science, published in 1989, and research by Davis and Watson (2001), noted that the attitudes of some teaching staff were said to be 'patronising', while others were reluctant to work with disabled pupils. Further, staff's attitudes were likely to be reflected in the attitudes and behaviour of non-disabled students towards their disabled peers. The effects of such attitudinal discrimination amongst peers may be seriously damaging to a young person's psychosocial development. As Haring (1991) argued, peer acceptance is a primary outcome of schooling, with important consequences for the quality of life of students with disabilities. Research on current discourse reveals that low childhood peer acceptance induces loneliness, truancy, psychopathology and suicide (Parker & Asher, 1987), as it deprives children of opportunities to learn normal, adaptive modes of social conduct and social cognition as well as undermining their academic progress.

Due to the access and resource limitations of several mainstream secondary schools, young disabled people often have to move to a school with suitable facilities for disabled people several miles from their home while their local non-disabled peers can make a straight transition to their local secondary school (Pitt & Cutin, 2004). It can be argued, then, that as long as mainstream schools do not embrace the full process of inclusion, young disabled people still may have no real choice in deciding where to continue their education.

Given the unresolved barriers of mainstream schooling, for some disabled students special schools are still a better option. Special schools and colleges have infrastructure fully accessible because they have been designed to meet the needs of this group of pupils. Moreover, academic staff members are usually very experienced at adapting their teaching to meet the individual needs of each pupil. As Watson *et al.* (1999) argued, special schools provide young disabled people with supportive environments, both physically and socially, in which they can explore and develop a sense of self without mainstream barriers.

However, special schools have their own shortcomings and restrict disabled students' post-school options in other ways. Disabled young people who attend the same school from their early infancy to early adulthood are being denied the experiences considered essential for the transition from childhood to adulthood, thus shielded from the realities of society (Barnes, 1991). Mulderij (1996) agrees that the experiences of mainstream situations are essential during school years if disabled children are to develop the skills to function productively in post-school community environments.

Another fundamental criticism of special schools is the limited curriculum offer which prevents students from learning the wide range of subjects perceived to be important to successful economic participation. Furthermore, Jenkinson (1997) identified many special school teachers' lack of training in, and experience of, the secondary curriculum as an increasing handicap as disabled students move into adulthood.

Methods

During the first half of 2004, seven educational institutions, within a city and county in the UK East Midlands were approached to participate in this qualitative study, 'Future Selves: Career Choices of Young Disabled People'. These included two special schools (one with sixth form unit), two mainstream secondary schools, two mainstream sixth form schools and one specialist further education college.

The researcher talked to thirty young disabled people, in special and mainstream education, in order to understand their educational experiences and how they make particular decisions about their occupational futures. The respondents were identified and invited to participate in the research by teachers or the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) of the individual school or college. Recruitment of students

was, on the whole, based on the research sample criteria outlined in the research booklet which was sent to each school and college prior to the start of the fieldwork.

The selection of the sample was based on the following criteria: (1) young people with different types of physical impairments including congenital, acquired and deteriorating conditions, and those who are non-verbal and use a communication device; (2) young people with a range of ages from 13 to 19 in schools, and 16-25 if at college; (3) young people who attend special school and mainstream school; (4) young people who are either just choosing their GCSE or A-Level options, choosing to apply for further or higher education or for jobs; (5) young people from a variety of different social class, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The intended sample was of young people who were expected to participate in vocational decision-making, focussing on significant points of choice. These points coincided with the following 5 age bands: 13-15, 15-16, 16-18, 19-25. This also corresponds to the points in time when the Connexions services are available to disabled people.

Interviewing and Life Stories

This research is about giving voice to the underdog in society (Becker, 1966/7): 'people who are often the subject of research, yet whose voices are rarely heard.' It is concerned with learning about the social reality of a group of people with different values, beliefs and experiences. Therefore the means of enquiry needs to be open-ended, enabling access to groups such as disabled people and children. For this, semi-structured interviews were used, with prompts and follow-up questions to generate accounts of the young disabled people's career decisions in terms of why and where they originated, who influenced these accounts, how the young people perceived they would achieve their choices, and what and who might enable or constrain their transitions. They explored factors like disabling barriers (physical, social and attitudinal), impairment, ethnicity, friends, family background, educational opportunities, type of school, and expectations of significant others. Interviews were conducted within the young persons' educational environment and typically lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. With the permission of the young people and, where they were under age 18, their parents, the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

The stories told by the young disabled people were guided by the topic-setting questions, so certain themes were explored with every participant. However, each story also generated sub-themes that the individual participant chose to identify: the aspects of current context they highlighted as significant and the ambiguities and contradictions within and between accounts (Jones, 1983). In this way, stories were both products and processes.

It may be argued that the acquisition of rich quality data during this study was facilitated by the fact that the interviewer and the participants came from the same minority group, that is, both parties shared experiences of challenging oppression, disablement, special education and partial integration. It is likely that this shared culture and background was helpful in accessing potential respondents, building rapport with them, encouraging them to be more open. It also offered a positive role-model, encouraging the young disabled people to ask the researcher questions about her own life, including whether she had encountered similar barriers to themselves when growing up and the coping strategies she used to overcome them. They were particularly enthusiastic to learn how the researcher has achieved her personal and professional choices in a society often perceived as working against them.

However, no research is completely free of bias. It is recognised that the closer our subject matter is to our own life the more we can expect our own world view to enter into and shape our work, to influence the questions we pose and the interpretations we generate from our findings. Nevertheless, as a British Indian professional disabled woman in her early thirties, only part of the researcher's life history resembled that of each respondent, so she still could retain a fair level of objectivity. Also, she kept in mind the danger of assuming too much commonality of perspective with respondents.

Voices of Young Disabled People – Preliminary Findings

The following are some preliminary findings of work in progress. Although formal data analysis is still on-going, a number of themes have already emerged from the interviews with young disabled people in special and mainstream schools. Four of these themes are summarised below:

Transitions

Transitions for the young disabled people in special schools were different from the educational transitions experienced by young people in mainstream school that typically involve a physical move from one school to another between nursery, primary, secondary and sixth form education. For these young disabled people, leaving school at age 16 or 19 was going to be the first major transition for them, and the first time they have to settle and become accustomed to a different environment. Some of the young disabled people had been in the same physical segregated environment from infancy. They used words like 'scared' and 'nervous' to describe their feelings about leaving school. However they also felt it was time for them to leave and experience something new:

> *'you know what I mean, it's just scary, look, I've been here since I was three... And its like, mmm, I'm going out into the big wide world.'* (Tyson, age 19, special school)

The post-school options of young people in special schools were limited and likely to be more dependent on their physical needs, relating to their impairment rather than their individual educational and occupational aspirations. Dreams of pursuing a particular career path had to be sacrificed for having support needs suitably met:

> *'I had a few problems I wanted to do beauty first, but er, I had a few problems with the* [mainstream] *college and that... discrimination... they kept just avoiding it, saying that I can't apply... They didn't help a lot so, so I gradually began to like photography... I've been accepted by* [X special] *college to do photography.'* (Fiona, age 19, special)

Post-school options in mainstream school seemed to be more related to students' career and educational aspirations:

> *'I've wanted to do English, not teaching, something involving writing more than teaching I think... I'm hoping to go further away for university in September to Uni [X] because it does the course I want, I've had a look, it takes the grades that I'm expected to get at A-levels... I want to do an English Literature degree.'* (Steve, age 18, mainstream)

Only certain mainstream secondary schools in Britain have been designated by the Department of Education and Skills as suitable for disabled students. Disabled students who attended their local primary school often are prevented from making a straight transition to their local secondary school with peers:

> *'The closest school I could have gone to was [X], but that's er like, a school for able people, fully able, you know what I mean and that's, that's where they went, my friends, my two best friends went there.'* (Mike, age 15, mainstream)

> *'I got more friends at my old* [primary] *school 'cos I knew 'em from when I was younger... I didn't go to um, my local secondary school because there was no access for disabled children. They had steps, just loads of steps!'* (Xavier, age 13, mainstream)

Physical Access

The poor facilities and physical access of mainstream schools were pointed out by many of the young people as preventing them from having equal academic and social opportunities to their non-disabled peers:

> *'I haven't been allowed to go on some of the trips because they're not accessible to wheelchairs'* (Sam, 17, mainstream)

> *'well they went to Germany but I generally didn't want to go, because it would have been hard and everything, I would have done but it was a bit hard so I didn't go'* (Mike, age 15, mainstream)

Several young people considered the physical environment of mainstream schools to hinder their independence, making them more dependent on its non-disabled population. Unfortunately this only reinforces the notion that disability is a personal tragedy and disabled people are different, dependent on, and passive recipients of, other people's charity:

> *'the bad thing is that I, I have to wait for people to open the door unless I try and do it myself, I can do a few doors myself but not all'*

> *'The setting of classrooms, like where the table and chairs are positioned, I have to always move them to get through... one of my classes I have to sit near the door so I can get out early, but I can't see the board.'* (Mike, age 15, mainstream)

The young people mentioned that the lifts in the school often broke down or had problems, making them late for class, thus both impeding the young people's learning and drawing attention to their disability.

> *'I've been I've been getting late for lessons because of people messing with the lift.'* (Xavier, age 13, mainstream)

> *'I know this sounds a bit weird but instead of lifts in this school, I think they should have ramps... because like lifts go two miles an hour as it is and you get, get to your lesson really really late'* (Nay, age 14, mainstream)

These encounters and the consequences they bring do much to contribute to the process of discrimination and difference. Poor physical access in mainstream schools not only limits the range of subjects young disabled people can choose from in schools, but also impedes their future career and social opportunities.

Friendships and Social Networks

Friends were important to the young people, and often identified as their favourite thing about school. For many young people in special schools, it was often considered the main reason for their choice of post-school placement (to sixth form or college). Some young people in mainstream school felt excluded from social networks, in or out of the classroom:

> *'At my old* [mainstream] *school they* [other kids] *would not be my partner in sports lessons, they thought I can't do nothing and left me out.'* (Noalga, age 15; special, transition from mainstream)

Disabled students often needed to assert themselves - sometimes physically - in order to be included in social situations:

> *'I have to do the chasing about if you like and take them [non-disabled students] places and they never really give anything in return.'* (Sabrina, age 14, mainstream)

Work Experience

Many of the students had not done work experience (especially from special school). However they all thought it was a good idea to give them an understanding of what activities they are best capable of performing, and the extent to which these activities will best satisfy their survival, pleasure and contribution needs. Therefore, through this process the young person gets certain experiences that directly influence their career choice and work behaviour:

> *'Work experience will be very good because I don't know what I can do and what I can't do, in a situation of work.'* (Zoe, age 17, special)

> *'No I haven't [done work experience] but I would like to... I definitely think it would be helpful... well, because I've nearly left school they [teachers] don't see any point, I'll probably do it when I get to college. Probably.'* (Hannah, age 19, special)

In instances where students had done or expected to do work experience, placements were more likely to be based on access and accommodation factors rather than the young people's career ambitions. For example, Nay who is 14, has aspirations to follow a career within the sports or music industry. However, when talking about work experience he says:

> *'I really want to do work experience at X special school nursery to help out, you know, like a nursery nurse.'*

The work placement does not necessarily need to always be directly connected to the young people's actual career aspiration to be beneficial to them. Actual work experience can provide young people with critical workplace skills, such as task-approach skills, responsibility and time management skills as can be illustrated by Steve's situation:

> *'I've always had a clear outline of what expectations I get out of it... I want to do an English Literature degree... I want to go into something involving writing... I've had three weeks work experience while I've been here...2 weeks at a special college doing various bits er and bobs there, but mainly to do with building my computer skills more than, more than to do with future career I think... I enjoyed that, it helped skills-wise anyway as I did web page design for three days, C.A.D for few days er, and I did work in the main office for a few days'*

Young Disabled People's Ideas for Change

At the end of the interviews each of the young disabled people were asked 'If you had the power to change anything in the whole world, what would it be?'. Their responses have not been analysed but are presented here as a testimony to their individuality:

> *'Change attitudes not disability'*
> *'Don't look down on disabled people'*
> *'Give disabled and non-disabled young people equal opportunities'*
> *'Educate young people about disability within schools'*
> *'Change the way me and my friends are all looked at...'*
> *'Have ramps instead of lifts at school'*
> *'I'd change my dad's opinion about disabled people'*
> *'Having disabled people in top jobs'*
> *'I'd like to change my chair to a different colour, to purple'*
> *'I'd make school more enjoyable by getting rid of the staff and letting the kids run the school'*
> *'Have the right help so I can be spontaneous.'*

Conclusion

This paper explores young disabled people's experiences and perceptions of educational inclusion, and the challenges and opportunities it produces in relation to their future career pathways. It presents some preliminary findings generated for a three year research project which is still in progress.

All young people face challenges in the transition to adult life, but this study presents evidence, consistent with other research (Shah *et al.*, 2004; Burgess, 2003) that young disabled people face particular barriers to achieving their aspirations. Many have to deal with prejudice and discrimination, are restricted in terms of educational and future careers opportunities available to them, and are constrained from fully participating in social activities with their non-disabled peers due to restrictions imposed by various practices and procedures of individual institutions and, at times, the education system as a whole. Examples such as those presented in this paper provide some pointers to the way in which disabled children can become differentially constructed within a mainstream school. This kind of ritual, and very public, 'othering' reinforces powerful discursive messages in the minds of today's pupils, the employers of the future. Based on a cumulative experience of small incidents, they begin to build discursive categories of 'special needs' or 'disability' that could convey and reproduce power relationships in their future occupational world.

However the categorisation of 'special need' is not avoided by special schools. Some would argue that the practices of special education differentiate disabled students from non-disabled peers in terms of shielding them from the realities of society and denying them the some experiences considered essential for the transition from childhood to adulthood (Barnes, 1991; Shah *et al.*, 2004)

The support systems and barriers for young disabled people outlined in the government's policy agenda may well differ from young disabled people's perceptions

about what facilitates and restricts their educational development and transition to meet occupational aspirations. If young disabled people's needs are to be met, their own accounts are important in developing services.

Services proposing to support young disabled people in their transition to adulthood can make all the difference to what happens to them. If they have information about these services, and support to achieve their goals and to tackle the disabling barriers that others create there is less chance that young disabled people will experience an adult life of dependency and low expectations (Morris, 2002).

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