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CHILDHOOD DISABILITY & EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS AND BULLYING

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About this briefing

Childhood disability is typically associated with poor educational attainment. However, we know relatively little about the different factors that contribute to disabled young people's educational disadvantage. This briefing presents findings from research that explores the factors that influence disabled young people's attainment and educational decisions at key points in the English school system. It explores the extent to which the low rates of disabled young people attending university are a result of poor performance, or experiences of stigma resulting in low educational expectations and school bullying.

Research context

Dr Stella Chatzitheochari (University of Warwick) and Professor Lucinda Platt (LSE) analysed data from the

Policy Recommendations

- The government has a responsibility to support the academic development of disabled young people from early childhood.
- Parents of disabled children should be supported to gain an understanding of the impact of family expectations on young people's education decision making.
- Higher Education Institutions should consider ways of actively promoting themselves to high achieving disabled young people.
- To better understand the impact of social factors on attainment, more research needs to be done, moving from biological towards more sociological understandings of disability.

Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), which followed the lives of approximately 16,000 adolescents born in 1989-1990. Young people were interviewed annually between 2004 and 2010, at ages 13 to 20. The LSYPE includes a wealth of data on long-term illness and special educational needs, addressing the lack of nationally representative information on childhood disability in England.

The research focuses on a sample of young people with disabilities, which includes those with long term physical, mental, and emotional conditions that compromise school attendance and ability to complete homework. The sample also includes young people with special educational needs who receive additional teaching support at school.

Key findings

Results show that young people with disabilities were more likely to enter secondary school with lower educational attainment at Key Stage 2, and went on to achieve substantially lower GCSE grades: only 26 per cent achieved 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE including English and Mathematics, compared to 67 per cent of non-disabled young people. In England, this level of attainment is typically required to continue in the traditional 'academic track' to university studies.

However, the analysis also finds a substantial number of disabled young people who achieve just as highly as their non-disabled counterparts but still choose not to continue in education or attend university. More specifically, among students who attain 5 A*-C GCSEs, a lower proportion of disabled students (75%) chose to continue in full-time upper secondary education compared to non-disabled students (85%). The researchers went on to examine whether this could be explained by experiences of stigma, among other factors. In order to achieve this, they examined the effects of school bullying experiences and educational expectations.

Parental expectations are key

While bullying was found to play a small role in young people's decisions to continue in full-time education, the research suggests that educational expectations have a considerably stronger effect on disabled young people's educational transitions.

The research shows that disabled young people's expectations are highly dependent on their parents' expectations. Parents of disabled young people are likely to have lower expectations for them regardless of their actual school performance.

Earlier research suggests that parents of disabled children often have overprotective attitudes and anxiety about their children's future. It is possible that parents' lower expectations are a result of social barriers faced by disabled people in England, including workplace discrimination. The research found that disabled adolescents are 15 percentage points more likely to have low university expectations compared to non-disabled counterparts of similar background prior to taking their GCSE examinations.

Expectations accounted for more than a quarter of the reason that disabled young people are less likely to continue in full-time education, despite achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE.

Conclusion

The research highlights the key role that social factors, particularly parental expectations, have on the educational trajectories of young people with disabilities. This is particularly significant as there is often an implicit assumption that disability is associated with poor attainment due to individual deficiencies resulting from impairments.

A substantial part of the overall effect of disability on young people's educational outcomes remains unexplained. More research is needed into the variety of factors, including those driven by stigma and labelling, which result in disabled young people's educational disadvantage. This is crucial to help the UK improve opportunities for people with disabilities and build a fair and inclusive society.

Further information

Chatzitheochari, S. and Platt, L. (2018) Disability Differentials in Educational Attainment in England: Primary and Secondary Effects, *British Journal of Sociology (Early View)*
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