

Understanding and Responding to the Experience of Disability, Jill Porter. 2015. 162pp. £29.99 (paperback). ISBN: 978-0-415-82291-6

The difficulties of accurately ascertaining the number of disabled children in the UK, and of agreeing a common definition of 'disability' for this purpose, have been well documented (although changes to the 2011 Census go some way to addressing the problem). Local education authorities face considerable challenges trying to gauge the number of disabled pupils in their schools, despite the importance of doing so both for planning purposes and to ensure they are meeting their duties under the Equality Act 2010. Research aimed at addressing these issues is broadly to be welcomed.

Jill Porter's slim book is primarily aimed at policy makers. It aims to increase their understanding of the complexity of 'disability' and encourage them to move beyond a focus on individual adjustment to the development of more proactive policies designed to make schools a better place for learning for *all* children. The book presents the findings of research, undertaken in England over a number of years, which aimed to devise user-friendly tools which would allow schools to collect their own information about the numbers, needs and participation of disabled pupils and thus make 'judicious decisions' about supporting children and ensuring anti-discriminatory practice.

Chapter 1 sets out the legislative and policy background and explains the need for, and difficulties surrounding, collecting data about disabled children, including the conflation in England between children with special education needs (SEN) and those who are disabled under the Equality Act.

Many children who meet the Act's definition do not have SEN while some children with SEN are not disabled under the Act. Education policy tends to focus on the latter and neglect the former.

Chapter 2 discusses conceptual understandings of disability, considering a number of models, while the next chapter considers the need for data to inform the evaluation of policy and practice impact, including the identification of children who meet the Equality Act definition. Chapters 4 and 5

describe how the data tools for this project were developed, trialled and disseminated for schools to adapt and use, and present the subsequent findings. The questionnaire to schools usefully challenged any assumptions that disability is the same as SEN and that all disabled children experience difficulties in learning. Chapter 6 is concerned with what schools learnt from the data they collected and how these were used, while the final chapter considers the implications of the findings in relation to school policy and wider issues about collecting disability data.

A particular strength of the research was that data were collected separately from parents, children and education staff, giving a well rounded overall picture and allowing each group to learn from the others' views. For example, schools became aware of pupils whose impairments or medical conditions had previously been invisible to them due to absences from school or because the children had developed effective coping strategies. Schools also developed better appreciation of the impact of some health conditions. Parents' comments on what children found most supportive in terms of help to learn and participate provided useful insights for schools while parents, in turn, had not appreciated how highly their children valued friendships at school. Indeed, most disabled children reported that social aspects of school were more significant than academic ones. They identified noise and safety as particular concerns within the school environment. Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from the research is the interdependence of learning, relating and belonging for disabled children (although this may apply equally to other children).

The inclusion in the research of children with hidden and invisible impairments is to be welcomed: part of Chapter 4 focuses on findings about those with asthma, mental distress or on the autistic spectrum, groups who are sometimes neglected. An imaginative range of tools was developed for children and they could choose which ones to respond to. Verbatim quotes from parents and children bring the 'findings' chapters to life.

Alongside the methodological strengths mentioned above, an apparent weakness in method lies in observations conducted of 42 children whose teachers and parents had given conflicting responses

regarding whether or not they were disabled. Researchers observed each of these children in class for 40 minutes, noting their level of participation (rated on a scale from 1 to 5) and any barriers and supports to their learning. This seems something of a 'quick and dirty' exercise with questionable validity and reliability in terms of determining children's participation patterns or disability status.

Indeed, on reading this book, I couldn't help wondering if it had been written in a hurry. There is an element of carelessness throughout, affecting both content and style. In relation to policy, for example, there is lack of clarity about the distinction between the UK Disability Discrimination Acts and the Equality Act, the former sometimes referred to as if still in operation. Strangely, in a book about disabled children and education, it is reported that the UK Government has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (misnamed in the text) but not that Britain has 'entered a reservation' - meaning exempted itself - from part of Article 24 which commits state parties to providing an inclusive education system. Under a section headed 'UK Policy' (and elsewhere), there is a lack of clarity about which policies apply to different parts of Britain, with some English policy discussed as if UK wide. It would have been helpful to explain that education is a devolved power in Scotland while equality legislation is reserved. There is no reference to additional support for learning, the term used in Scottish policy and legislation rather than SEN.

The discussion about 'Understanding Disability' suggests a somewhat limited reading of the literature; for example, statements are attributed to authors who were in fact quoting another author, including the seminal definition of 'disability' as something imposed on top of impairments, issued by UPIAS (Union of the Impaired against Segregation) in 1975 which forms the basis of the social model of disability. The term 'the disabled' is used twice, a 'no-no' within Disability Studies.

Finally, the text is riddled with 'loose' writing, sometimes resulting in unclear or even misleading statements. Proof-reading has been poor and there are a lot of typos.