

**Disability Rights Commission**

# Research Summary

**Experiences of Disabled Students  
and Their Families: Phase 1 –  
DRC Research Summary**

**Making rights a reality**

## **The Disability Rights Commission**

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) is an independent body, established by Act of Parliament to eliminate the discrimination faced by disabled people and promote equality of opportunity. When disabled people participate – as citizens, customers and employees – everyone benefits. So we have set ourselves the goal of ‘a society where all disabled people can participate fully as equal citizens’.

We work with disabled people and their organisations, the business community, Government and public sector agencies to achieve practical solutions that are effective for employers, service providers and disabled people alike.

There are about 10 million disabled people in Britain. This includes people with epilepsy, cancer, schizophrenia, Down’s syndrome and many other types of impairment.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, legal rights and obligations affecting disabled people’s access to services, education and employment are already in force. Others became law in 2004.

Many disabled people are still not aware that they have these rights. And employers, education providers and service providers are often unsure how to implement ‘best practice’ to make it easier for disabled people to use their services, access education or gain employment.

The DRC has offices in England, Scotland and Wales. For further details of how we can help you, please contact our Helpline – contact details are featured on the back cover of this publication.

## **Background**

This summary outlines research funded by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) and undertaken between August 2004 and March 2005, by a team based at the University of Birmingham. In order to understand and address prejudice and discrimination, and to ensure access and equality of opportunity in education, previous DRC research has identified a need for more information on the experiences and views of young disabled people and their parents or carers.

The remit of this first phase of research was to explore the educational experiences of disabled pupils/students and their families. This encompassed identifying (broadly) their concerns and priorities but also, importantly, identifying and trialling appropriate research methodologies for a second phase of research. This second phase of research started in summer 2005 and is due to be completed in summer/autumn 2006.

## Methods

Part 1 incorporated three approaches focused on child/family oriented work in two Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England:

- 29 children/young people (spanning disability, age (7-19 years) and special/mainstream provision) were involved in in-depth individual or small group interviews (LEA 1) using a range of methods adjusted to meet individual needs and preferences. These methods included 1:1 interviews, cue-card prompted interviews, drawings, mapping, puppets, self-reports to video, photography and diamond ranking.
- 8 families were involved in in-depth small group interviews (LEA 2).
- In addition, 8 students (age 18-30+) attending a specialist further education college were involved in in-depth small group interviews.

Part 2 focused on an e-survey of parents/carers of disabled children/young people. The survey, made accessible to 13 web-based organisations, elicited information about experiences as well as ratings of perceptions about autonomy, empowerment, inclusion and identity. The survey generated replies from 157 respondents, spanning England, Wales and Scotland as well as a range of impairment groups.

## Key Findings – Issues

The following main issues emerged in relation to the substantive issues around autonomy, choice and empowerment; inclusion and support; and personal identity:

- There is considerable enthusiasm for speaking/making their views heard across all groups (children, young people and adults) and a willingness to engage.

- The ‘hidden economy’ and non-conventional resources (eg community-based) are important in shaping educational opportunities and experiences for disabled children and young people.
- A major theme emerged around disabled children’s resilience: specifically, how this is fostered or hampered across individual, school, family and community/cultural contexts. Resilience is tested and/or strengthened at times of transition so transitional experiences have a particular importance, and salience, for children/young people and their parents/carers.
- That salience emerged, for children and their parents, both in reported events and in hopes/fears for the future. For older students in further education settings, the availability of good quality academic and personal support seems to be particularly significant in enabling young people develop personal autonomy and ‘move on’ from difficulties experienced in school and in the earlier experience of post-school education.

## Key Findings – Methods and methodologies

- There is a need for flexibility of methods to suit individual participants (child and adult) but given this flexibility and time, a very wide range of children and young people can share their views. The children/young people who took part felt it was important for them to be included, consulted and listened to, and were less concerned about the specific methods used.
- Mixed methods and methodologies have considerable value in obtaining generalisability as well as depth. The researchers found that when exploring the views of parents/carers, as well as young disabled people, they needed to draw on a range of methods in order to obtain a representative spectrum of views.

- Sensitivities around the language of disability and SEN need to be recognised; these may be particularly salient for young people in secondary, particularly mainstream, schooling. This has implications for sampling as some young people with SEN may not identify as disabled (or parents and teachers may not identify them as such), and conversely some young people with impairments covered by the DDA may not be identified as potential participants because they do not have a special educational need (eg someone with epilepsy).

## **Phase Two**

A second phase of research started in summer 2005 and is due to be completed in summer/autumn 2006. The project will build on Phase 1, as well as previous DRC and other research, and will provide evidence of key issues in education for young disabled people and their parents and carers in Great Britain.

## **Further information**

The full report on Phase 1 is available on the education research pages of DRC website, and further information on Phase 2 will also be posted as this becomes available:

<http://www.drc.org.uk/publicationsandreports/research.asp>

Further information on DRC education policy, legislation and disability rights is available at:


<http://www.drc.org.uk/education/>

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