

# Editorial

## **Chris Walter and Charlotte Wilson**

We're delighted to have been asked to edit this special themed edition of the *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care*, on perspectives and understandings of disability. It's been an inspiring experience to see the research and practice which is being carried out, and to consider the learning from this. This issue represents the great diversity of people with disabilities, and their experiences, from all over the world. We have a varied international collection of full-length articles and shorter pieces.

Following on from the critical findings of the UN report into people with disabilities in the UK (Butler, 2017) it is timely that this journal now has an issue dedicated to the policy context, lives and experiences of disabled people. Whilst it is undeniable that there have been huge developments in understanding and provision in recent years, many prejudices and misunderstandings remain.

As Runswick-Cole and Goodley (2018) argue, the continued marginalisation of disabled children indicates that they have benefitted less from recent developments in policy and practice than other looked after children. It could indeed be argued that this is even more the case for those children with developmental impairments whom it can be all too easy for researchers and policy makers to side-line due to the difficulties of engaging with them. In this period of welfare austerity their provision can be amongst the first to suffer from reduced resources, inadequate staffing and over-medicalised assessment processes.

This issue starts with a paper from Antonia Kenny and Martin Power, presenting the findings of a research study undertaken with social care workers in Ireland, on their perspectives of barriers and opportunities to social inclusion for people with intellectual disability. Karlis Laksevics, Arturs Poksans, and Kristians Zalans' article provides a different perspective on a similar theme, with a critical review of the deinstitutionalisation process for residential child care in Latvia. The social

inclusion of people with learning disabilities in all contexts can be seen as a direct illustration of the rhetoric formed from constructions of disability.

As both these and other contributors to this issue attest, there remain many challenges to meaningful inclusion, chief amongst these being what Thomas (2007) described eleven years ago as psycho-emotional disablism: hurtful, hostile language and attitudes that have a huge impact on self-esteem and a sense of belonging. She argues that the cumulative impact of psycho-emotional disablism can result in 'barriers to being'; affecting what people with impairments feel they can be or become. Despite many positive developments, societal discourses regarding disability can often appear deeply contradictory; oscillating between a sometimes overly sentimental attitude, and an anxiety about 'challenging behaviour'. This ambivalence is evident in many of its' institutions, chief amongst them being the school system, and may be reflected in the number of school exclusions. Indeed, children in secondary schools with additional support needs are twice as likely as those without additional needs to be excluded (Goodwin, 2018).

Many of us working with children and young people with a range of developmental issues have faced the frustration of attempting to work within the school system and current educational priorities. As Runswick-Cole and Goodley (2018) argue, it is all too often the case that the main purpose of the educational system seems to be to create neat, tidy, conformist, hard working adults. Of course, disabled children don't fit into this picture and consequently are too often excluded and thus further marginalised. This is not the fault of individuals but rather our gaze needs to focus on the wider socio-political priorities that, they argue, too often see this population as problems to be solved that disrupt the smooth running of society. Consequently, the 'hidden curriculum' of many educational institutions can too often seem predicated on the need to move disabled individuals towards more socially acceptable ways of being, rather than valuing difference.

Goodley (2014) traces the way ableist concepts permeate the whole of our society, often in ways that we barely realise. As he says, ability starts off as a fairly benign concept: we all want to have and develop abilities. But when the

measuring of ability is linked to how we are valued as people then it becomes a yardstick for how we measure up to a normative model of humanity. Kenny and Power's article cites the realisation of some respondents that our aspirations for people with disabilities (for example, to integrate with others in society rather than staying in their groups) may be based on our assumptions of what everyone should be like. There is a growing realisation that we need to understand the experience of children with disabilities from a much wider, holistic perspective that values all aspects of their lives, rather than a 'monochrome' version. In this context, it is refreshing to encounter Vanessa Wilson's paper, and the article by Mary Morris which both explore the benefits of animal-assisted therapy with a focus on children with autism spectrum disorder. Mary's article is based on a recent publication 'Animal Magic,' which she was heavily involved in. They provide two very different but fascinating perspectives on a previously less well-researched area.

Despite the encouraging development of disability legislation over the last twenty years and the rhetoric of inclusion, we are still in danger of adopting a binary view of such children with disabilities where they are either seen as 'sick' or 'out of control'. Stalker's (2014, p. 8) words in this journal still ring true: 'There still appears to be a lingering view that disabled children are different from others in some undefined but negative way, while inclusion can be interpreted narrowly, minimising impairment effects and failing to make appropriate adjustments'.

One such appropriate adjustment is in relation to communication preferences. Ann Clark and Dermot Fitzsimmons's article discusses the communication needs of disabled children within the Scottish Children's Hearings system. While the majority of people with a learning disability have a communication impairment, difficulties with communication are not limited to children with disabilities. Many neurotypical children in residential care have communication impairments; possibly on a scale similar to children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. At the same time, many residential workers feel frustrated in their work with disabled children and young people due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of these 'impairment effects' and the ways in which these have been compounded due to negative life experiences. In this sense a label of

Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ADHD, can limit our perspective as we fail to recognise the attachment difficulties and trauma a young person is dealing with. However, it is important to recognise the protective factors that residential environments have the potential to offer, in enhancing all young people's resilience.

Finally, as usual, we conclude the issue with book reviews contributed by Moyra Hawthorne and Claire Cameron.

We'd like to take the opportunity here to say a special thanks to the practitioners and young people who've brought this issue to life, and to Dr Graham Connolly for his creative suggestions and astute guidance, in bringing it all together.

## About the author(s)

Charlotte Wilson has over fifteen years experience working with young people with learning disabilities in a variety of different residential settings. She is currently employed as Service Manager for Children and Young People and Registration with the Care Inspectorate.

Chris Walter has nearly forty years of experience of working in residential care, most of this time being in Camphill School in Aberdeen where he worked as a class teacher for adolescents as well as running a house with young people with a range of learning disabilities

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