

Young disabled people experience institutional discrimination and stigmatization in mainstream English schools

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New research by the University of Warwick has found that disabled young people in England experience institutional and structural

discrimination in mainstream schools, with two thirds fewer achieving level 2 qualifications compared to non-disabled peers. Academics argue that these experiences are a key barrier to educational and occupational attainment.

Academics from the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick recently completed a [three-year research project](#) which investigated educational pathways and work outcomes of disabled [young people](#) in England.

Researcher Dr. Stella Chatzitheochari said, "These negative experiences certainly influence [educational attainment](#), but we also have evidence that these experiences may cause psychological harms which have long term effects and may follow people into adulthood and influence their employment trajectories. Negative school experiences and stigmatization may cause young disabled people to lack self-efficacy and their career aspirations may suffer as a result."

The research project included analysis of nationally representative data and interviewed 35 autistic, dyslexic, and/or physically disabled young people. Young people were interviewed twice, the first time prior to their GCSE examinations and the second time one year later. The study also interviewed young people's parents/guardians.

The project found that [disabled young people often experience instances of institutional and structural discrimination in mainstream schools](#), which ultimately result in inadequate SEN support and negative school experiences. Examples of such instances include denial of school entry, inadequate exam provisions, Learning Support that does not fully address student support needs, lack of appropriate spaces as well as exclusionary practices. To a large extent, these issues are linked to current problems with SEN funding.

Dr. Chatzitheochari gave evidence at the House of Lords Public Services Committee inquiry examining young disabled people's experiences transitioning from education to employment. At the hearing, she emphasized the importance of collecting and scrutinizing evidence surrounding different conditions and impairments, in order to offer a range of support for a diverse range of needs.

"It is really crucial to acknowledge that disabled young people are a very heterogeneous group who have different impairment/condition-based limitations and needs and may face different barriers in education and employment. Young disabled people need support, but the type of support needed will vary greatly from person to person. Person-centered rather than one-size fits all approaches are crucial to facilitate school-to-work transitions of disabled young people," Dr. Chatzitheochari continues.

"We also need to consider that disabled young people's experience of disadvantage is also greatly impacted by other factors such as socio-economic background, ethnicity and gender. For example, research from our project shows that disabled young people from working class backgrounds are a lot more likely to experience educational and occupational disadvantage. So, in terms of finding a solution and building [support](#) pathways that are fit for purpose, it is very complex piece of work that needs to be done."

During the committee Dr. Chatzitheochari also drew on her previous research and explained that a large proportion of young disabled people leave school with poor qualifications.

While Department for Education data captures these outcomes for those identified with [special educational needs](#) in the educational system, other studies have captured those without special educational needs but with long standing conditions and impairments, such as diabetes, who are also

educationally disadvantaged, and their needs should also be considered.

Her research has found that just [26% of those with SEND \(special educational needs and disability\), long-standing conditions and impairments, achieved Level 2 qualifications](#), as opposed to 67% of those with no known disabilities.

"This is a particularly disadvantaged population of young people. Our study has identified key barriers these young disabled people face moving from education into employment; many of these stem from their earlier experiences in education," explains Dr. Chatzitheochari.

"We know from research that disabled people tend to have negative experiences at school. In earlier research, we have used nationally representative data to show that they are more likely to experience physical and emotional bullying in school settings both in childhood as well as early adolescence."

More papers on the inequalities young people experience in their [school-to-work transitions](#) are anticipated from the research team in the coming months.

More information: Results: warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociolog.../educationalpathways

Provided by University of Warwick

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