

The education and employment of disabled young people

Developing positive aspirations is a key factor in securing good educational and occupational outcomes, and an important component of autonomy. This study, by Tania Burchardt of the London School of Economics, compared the aspirations of young disabled and non-disabled people, and examined the extent to which those aspirations were achieved. It found that:

- The scope and level of aspirations among disabled 16-year-olds were similar to those of their non-disabled counterparts. Three-fifths of each group wanted to stay on in education; between one-quarter and one-third were aiming for a professional qualification.
- Disabled and non-disabled 16-year-olds expected the same level of earnings from a full-time job.
- Despite these similar aspirations, the experience of disabled and non-disabled young people diverged sharply in early adulthood. Three-fifths of non-disabled young people reported that they got the education or training place or job they wanted after finishing compulsory education, whereas just over half of disabled youngsters said the same.
- At the age of 18/19, the highest qualification of 48 per cent of disabled young people was at the equivalent of NVQ level 1 or below (GCSE grades D-G or below), including those with no qualifications, compared with 28 per cent of non-disabled young people.
- At age 26, disabled people were nearly four times as likely to be unemployed or involuntarily out of work than non-disabled people. Among those who were in employment, earnings were 11 per cent lower than for their non-disabled counterparts with the same level of educational qualifications.
- At age 26, the occupational outcomes of 39 per cent of disabled people were below the level to which they had aspired ten years previously, compared with 28 per cent of non-disabled people.
- The impact of young disabled people's frustrated ambition was apparent in the widening gap between disabled and non-disabled young people as they moved into their twenties, in terms of confidence, subjective well-being and belief in their ability to shape their own future.



Background

Disabled young people have not always been encouraged to see themselves as having a valuable role in adult society. Previous research on a sample of young people born in 1958 reported that the proportion of disabled youngsters aspiring to semi-skilled and unskilled jobs was six times that of non-disabled youngsters with those aspirations (A Walker, 1982, *Unqualified and underemployed: handicapped young people and the labour market*, Macmillan).

This study asked whether the gap between disabled and non-disabled young people's aspirations, and the even larger gap in their subsequent attainment, has persisted for those born more recently. The research analysed data from cohort studies of children born in 1970 and in the early 1980s.

Aspirations

Dan's story (see Box 1) showed what could happen when things went well. The account was drawn from the data, and was typical insofar as the aspirations expressed by Dan at age 16 were comparable with those that a non-disabled person from a similar background might express.

The study found that in general:

- three in five young people wanted to stay on after 16, whether or not they were disabled;
- one in three disabled young people aspired to a professional occupation, compared with one in four non-disabled;
- the average weekly pay that disabled and non-disabled 16/17-year-olds expected from a full-time job was similar.

Some groups of disabled young people seemed to be at risk of lower aspirations, though the sub-samples were too small for differences to be statistically robust. They included:

- young people with mental health problems;
- those with more severe impairments or more complex needs;
- those who became disabled later in childhood.

For both disabled and non-disabled young people, there was a strong gradient of educational and occupational

Box 1: Dan's story

At age 16, Dan is living with his mother. She had left school at the earliest opportunity, but is now studying part-time. Dan's father, who was educated to degree level, died when Dan was 10. The family income is under £50 per week. Dan has a sight impairment. The school nurse considers that this has resulted in 'some interference' with his daily life.

Dan attends mainstream school and has a generally positive attitude towards school and school work, though he has often felt anxious or depressed in the previous year. He wants to go on to higher education. (His mother also hopes and expects he will stay on in education.) His ideal job would be a bank manager.

Dan is highly motivated and a firm believer in his ability to control his own fate. However, he feels that he has little support from his mother and wants to leave home "now or very soon".

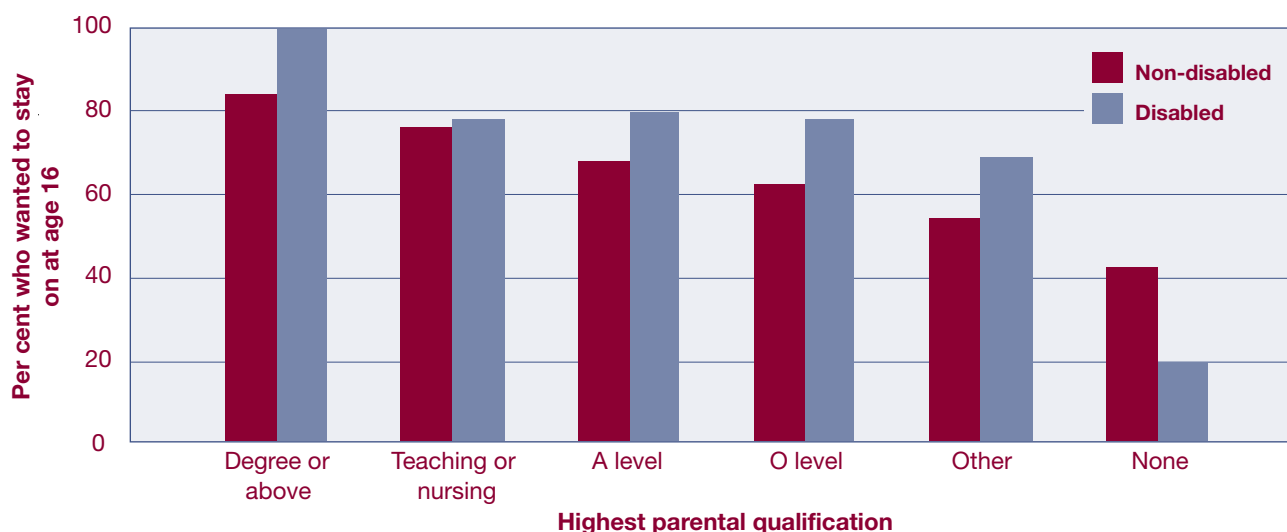
By age 26, Dan is partway through a professional accounting qualification, having achieved eight 'O' levels, two CSE grade 1s, four 'A' levels and a degree.

He is working full-time as an accounts clerk in a large firm, and has never been unemployed since leaving college. He is earning just slightly above the average for all employees in the sample.

Dan is cohabiting with his girlfriend in a house they are buying with a mortgage.

Source: British Cohort Study 1970

Figure 1: Young people's educational aspirations and parental education



Source: 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) age 16 survey

aspirations relating to their parents' educational and social class background (see Figure 1). Young people whose parents lacked educational qualifications were more than four times as likely to intend leaving education at 16 than those who had at least one parent educated to degree level.

Young people's own motivation and outlook were also crucial, especially in the case of disabled young people. Those with a firmer belief in their ability to shape their future were more likely to aim high.

Educational outcomes

Unfortunately, Dan's story was less typical in terms of experiences in early adulthood.

At age 16/17:

- 71 per cent of non-disabled respondents were in full-time education, compared with 62 per cent of disabled respondents;
- three-fifths of non-disabled people reported that they got the education or training place or job they wanted; only just over half of disabled youngsters said the same.

By age 18/19:

- the highest qualification of 48 per cent of disabled young people was at the equivalent of NVQ level 1 or below (GCSE grades D-G or below, including those with no qualifications), compared with 28 per cent of non-disabled young people;
- disabled young people still in education at this age were more likely than their non-disabled peers to be pursuing secondary-level or vocational qualifications.

By age 26, some young people who were not disabled at age 16 had become disabled, others were no longer disabled, while the majority either remained non-disabled or remained disabled. At age 26:

- the educational attainment of two-fifths of young people who were disabled at both age 16 and age 26 was below their initial level of aspiration, compared with one-third of young people who were disabled at neither age.

The relationship between disability, educational aspiration at 16 and qualifications at age 26 can be illustrated in more detail (see Figure 2). For example, 68 per cent of non-disabled young people who aspired to higher education succeeded in gaining a degree-level qualification (left-hand column). This figure compares with 56 per cent of young people disabled at both ages who had similar aspirations (fourth column from the left).

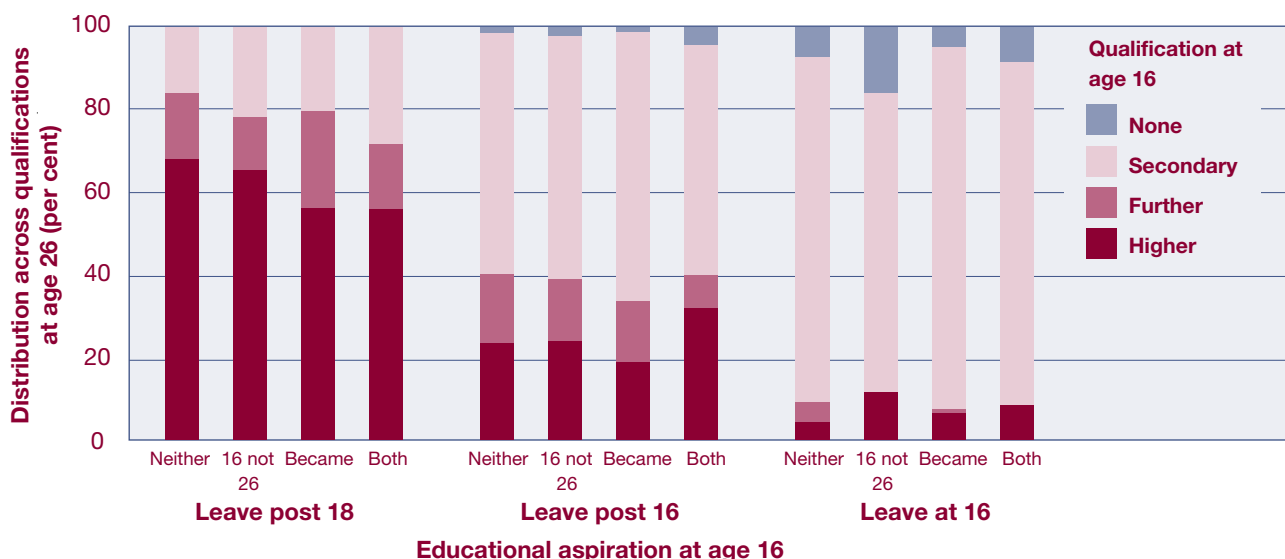
Multivariate analysis showed that educational aspirations were an important, independent influence on educational outcomes, for disabled and non-disabled young people alike. Controlling for other characteristics like parental education, young people who became disabled between the ages of 16 and 26, and those who were disabled at both ages, had lower educational attainment *relative to their aspirations* than did their non-disabled counterparts.

Occupational outcomes

The gap between the proportion of disabled and non-disabled young people out of work widened as they got older:

- at age 16/17, disabled young people were about twice as likely as non-disabled to be out of work or 'doing something else' (13 per cent compared with 7 per cent);
- by age 18/19, disabled young people were nearly three times as likely to be unemployed or 'doing something else' (25 per cent compared with 9 per cent);
- at age 26, young people who were disabled at both age 16 and age 26 were nearly four times as likely to be unemployed or involuntarily out of work than young people who were disabled at neither age (13.8 per cent compared with 3.7 per cent).

Figure 2: Highest qualification at age 26, by disability status and aspiration at age 16



Source: BCS70 age 16 and 26 surveys

Note: By age 26, some young people who were not disabled at age 16 had become disabled ('Became'), others were no longer disabled ('16 not 26'), while the majority either remained non-disabled ('Neither') or remained disabled ('Both').

Even among those who were in employment, earnings were lower for disabled than for non-disabled employees. At age 26, disabled young people were earning 11 per cent less than their non-disabled counterparts with the same educational qualifications.

Occupational outcomes fell below aspirations for many young people, but the gap was larger for disabled young people: 39 per cent of them fell below their initial aspiration level, compared with 28 per cent of non-disabled young people.

Frustrated ambition

The encouraging aspect of the study's results is that the aspirations of disabled and non-disabled teenagers appeared to have converged since the 1970s. The earlier research (Walker, 1982), on a cohort of young people who were 16 in 1974, found large gaps in the aspirations of disabled and non-disabled youngsters. These gaps were not replicated among the cohorts studied in this research, who were aged 16 in 1986 and in 1998/2000 respectively.

The discouraging aspect is that high aspirations have not been translated into comparable educational or occupational attainment. The resulting frustration and disappointment were reflected in a widening gap between disabled and non-disabled young people in various measures of confidence and subjective well-being. By age 26, disabled people were:

- less confident of the strengths they brought to the labour market;
- had a higher malaise score;
- were three times more likely to agree that 'Whatever I do has no real effect on what happens to me'.

At age 16, however, there had been no significant difference between them and their non-disabled peers on any of these measures.

Conclusion

The study concluded that poverty of aspiration is not the main barrier for young people with physical or sensory impairments. Rather than advice and encouragement, the main effort should focus on transforming the actual opportunities available to disabled young people, for example through:

- ensuring continuity of support (including funding, equipment and personnel), especially in the transition from secondary to further education;
- opportunities to return to education, focusing on acquiring higher qualifications, not just basic skills;
- work placements related to each young person's expressed interests, with support from Access to Work.

Evidence of unequal pay between disabled and non-disabled young people with similar qualifications and in similar occupations requires urgent investigation. Moreover, the widening gaps between disabled and non-disabled young people's participation in employment as they move into early adulthood indicates that the Government's professed goal of opportunity for all is far from being achieved.

About the project

The research was based primarily on analysis of data from two sources: the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), a nationally representative study of all children born in one week in 1970; and cohorts 9 and 10 of the Youth Cohort Study (YCS), a nationally representative study of people of school-leaving age, who were born in 1982/3 and 1984/5. BCS70 was selected because it is a very rich dataset and follows young people through to their mid-twenties. The data used in the study were from the ages 16 and 26 sweeps (carried out in 1986 and 1996). YCS was selected because it is more recent (age 16/17 surveys in 1998/2000), though the corollary of that is the shorter follow-up (age 18/19 surveys in 2000/2002).

The study focused on disabled people with physical or sensory impairments or mental health problems. The experiences of young people with cognitive impairments are equally important, but were not the subject of this study.

For further information

The full report, **The education and employment of disabled young people: Frustrated ambition** by Tania Burchardt, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 807 X, price £9.95).

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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