Disability, Social Class, and Educational Transitions: Findings from the Educational Pathways and Work Outcomes Qualitative Longitudinal Study

Angharad Butler-Rees

Stella Chatzitheochari

18 October 2023

ESRC Online Seminar Series

The Disabled Transitions Project

- Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant (2020-2023)

- Research Team: Stella Chatzitheochari (PI), Angharad Butler-Rees (PDRA), Sanne Velthuis (PDRA), Melissa Chapple (RA)

- To document educational and occupational transitions of disabled young people in England and understand (re)production of disadvantage among this group.

- Secondary analysis of Next Steps longitudinal study & Qualitative longitudinal study of disabled young people *(the focus of today's presentation)*

Adolescent Disability and Socioeconomic Disadvantage

Disabled children and young people more likely to experience educational and occupational disadvantage in adulthood compared to non-disabled peers

Proportion of people **with no qualifications** in 2015/16

Disabled
18.0%

Non-disabled
6.4%

Disabled 16-18-year-olds

2X as likely to not be in education, employment or training

Infographics from EHRC report *Being Disabled in Britain*
https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/disability-report-being-disabled-britain

Background

Disability overlooked in mainstream social stratification research; inequalities often assumed to be self-evident

Disability/SEN are very heterogeneous categories, usually treated as homogenous in existing research

Disabled adolescents absent from disability studies/youth studies, and rarely included as research informants in their own right

Conceptual Background (I)

Insights from social stratification theory and disability studies

1. Stigma theories and the process of "psycho-emotional disablism"

Health-related stigma as "a social process characterized by exclusion, rejection, blame or devaluation that results from experience, perception, or anticipation of an adverse social judgement about a person or a group" (Scambler, 2009)

Labelling theory and research – SEN support vs stigma / educational research on SEN

2. Intersectionality – how different axes of disadvantage interact to produce discrete structural locations

Social class: How class-based privilege contributes to inequalities between disabled young people (works of Lareau, Calarco, Ball for non-disabled students); mechanisms of attainment and aspirations, agency and stigma

Disability: different impairment-based and disability-specific barriers of different conditions/impairments (e.g., ableism, structural discrimination)

Conceptual Background (II)

3. Reproduction of inequality and disability as a longitudinal/dynamic process

Move beyond static, cross-sectional approaches

Adoption of longitudinal lens to trace temporal processes and unfolding lives
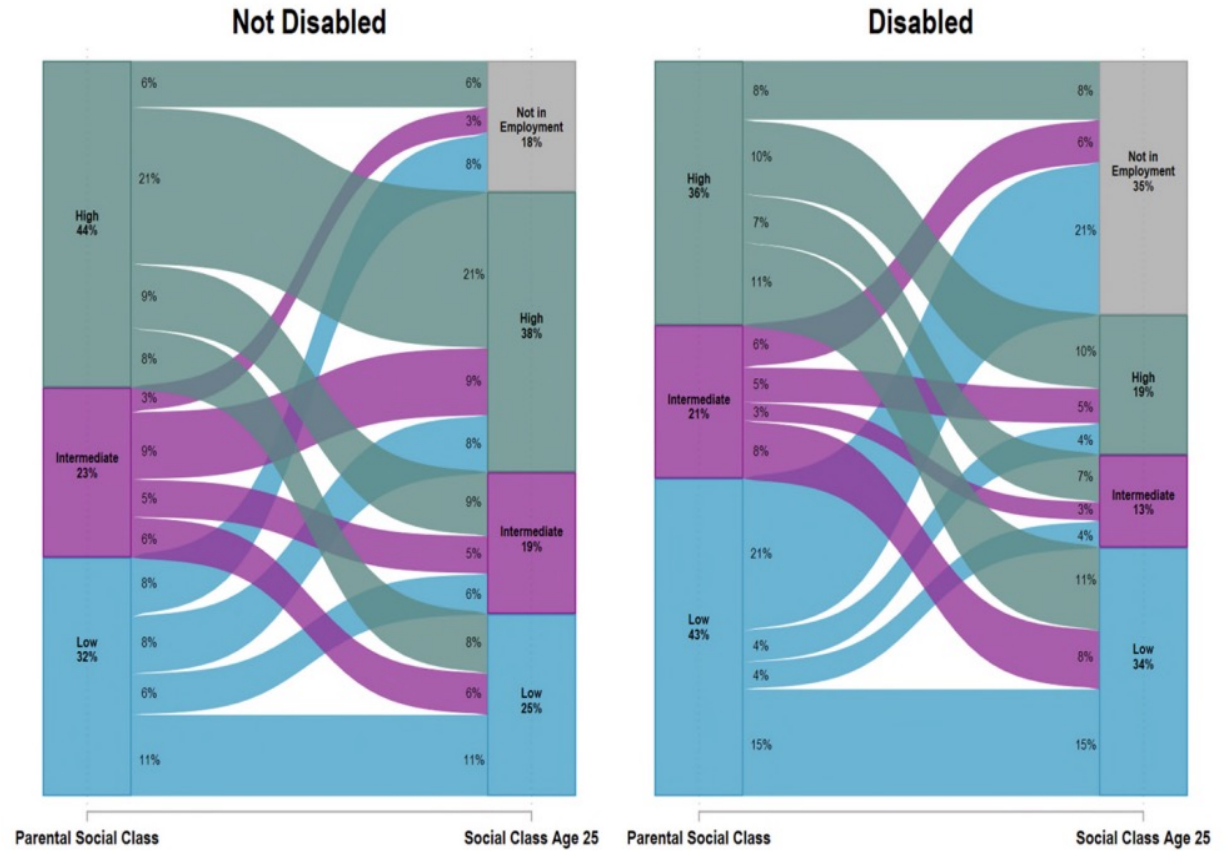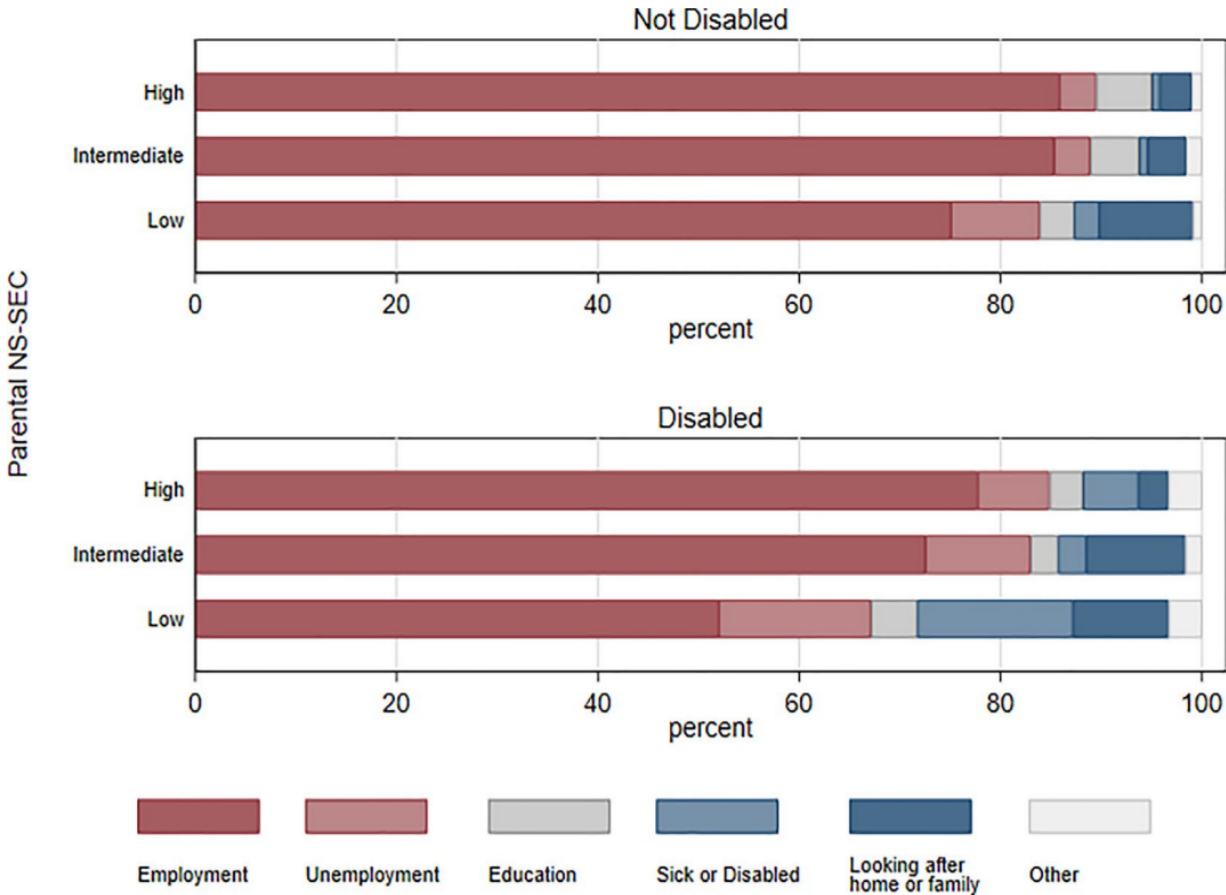
Quantitative Evidence: Class and Disability

Figure 1. Social class origins and destinations at age 25 by disability status.

Qualitative Longitudinal Study of Disabled Young People – Sampling

Intersectional Design

Disability: autism, dyslexia, physical disability*

Social Class: high, middle, low class (defined by parental occupation)

COVID-19 complicated recruitment; ongoing difficulties sampling marginalised groups (slightly skewed sample)

* Overlapping conditions, complexity of needs/construction of difference

Data Collection

- 35 study members
- Biographical interviews (online/phone/face-to-face)
  - Wave 1: School year 11 - 15-16 years old (before GCSE examinations)

  Life histories and educational journeys
  - Wave 2: School year 12/13 - 17-18 years old

  Focus on transition and changes
- 26 Semi-structured interviews with participants' parents to complement understanding
- Embedded accessibility and inclusion into the research design and methods

Wave 1: School Experiences of Disabled Young People in Mainstream Schools in England

- Classed experiences in school provision, inclusion, and discrimination in learning spaces

- Upper/middle class parental advantages in navigating the system:
  - entry to schools with exemplary SEND provisions and inclusive environment
  - transfers mid-way through the school year to counter instances of structural discrimination and/or bullying
  - periods of home education
  - securing diagnosis privately (linked to EHC plans)
  - financing private assessments and tuition, as well as in-school support.

- Both material resources and cultural capital yield advantages for disabled young people in school settings

School experiences by social class

- Working class participants often unsupported at school, experience frequent exclusion and discrimination – associated with poorer outcomes and wellbeing.
    - Daniel: Year 7 and 8 I got the support I needed, and then Year 9 is when it started dropping off. As it went on, I got no support. I had a Teaching Assistant for 3 years and she knew me well and then they just put her somewhere else… in Maths I went from top set to third set, 'cos when the support stopped, they just put me down… I feel very let down since I was doing so well with my support and then when it all stopped, everything just collapsed.
    - Interviewer: And how did your mum respond?
    - Daniel: She was trying to get back all the support, but the school was just not listening.
    - [Daniel – Autistic, dyslexic; low social class] [Wave 1]

School experience/inclusion by disability type (1)

- Different conditions/impairments have different limitations, needs, and are subject to different types of discrimination

- Clear disadvantage for autistic young people in Wave 1
    - Turbulent journeys to receiving diagnosis and in-school support
    - Lack of individualised approaches (complexity)
    - Bullying and/or victimisation

- Impact of "perceived typicality", tuning in to stereotypical perceptions about stigmatised categories (Monk, 2012)

School experience/inclusion by disability type (2)

- 'I was going to be excluded because they were thinking - I'm doing all of these things because I'm just being naughty or I'm just a problem child, a nuisance or a troublemaker… for the teachers it was much easier for them to call me a troublemaker and a problem child and to just throw me into detention. It just made their life easier rather than to work with me and understand why I'm doing what I'm doing.'

[Rahul – autistic, dyslexic, physically disabled; low social class] [Wave 1]

Wave 2: Navigating the post-GCSE transition (1)

- Disparities observed in W1 have implications for disabled young people's

  - Educational attainment

  - Well-being

  - Post-GCSE pathways

- Different destinations: stay on at school for sixth form, alternative school sixth form, further education college, SEN college.

- Interested in trajectories of discrimination and stigma – key to understanding social exclusion and adverse negative outcomes in adulthood

Wave 2: Navigating post-GCSE transition (2)

- Positive experiences more common amongst those who moved educational setting ("a new start")
  - Greater improvements in attainment and self-esteem
- Removal of structural barriers - more appropriate provision, learning styles, and/or mentoring
  - Condition/Impairment(s) seen to be less disabling in these contexts and so individuals subject to less discrimination/ableism.
- Greater agency over:
  - Educational provision – choice of courses which better fit abilities/needs/preferences
  - Learning support (particularly important for working class young people – example to follow)
- Different destinations but less inequalities in the school experiences of young people from different social class backgrounds
- Ongoing disadvantage amongst autistic young people who encountered far greater barriers in accessing adequate support and post-16 provision

Structural change enabling agency (1)

- Some young people moved to more supportive settings e.g., SEN Colleges with specialist knowledge of their condition(s) and more extensive support provision
  - Reducing barriers to learning, while increasing individual agency and self-esteem.
- The teachers are great - they understand me. They're not just normal teachers who don't know anything about people like me, [who] just kick people out, rather than try work with them... They have all the support in place. So, they've got OT, speech and language therapy and sensory rooms. So, everything is there that I need.

[Rahul, autistic, dyslexic, physically disabled, low social class] [Wave 2]

Structural change enabling agency (2)

- "Early on, there were some behavioural problems at college. So, they said, right, we're going to tackle this head on. So, I sat down with my mentor created a plan of strategies that help. And he sent a copy to all my teachers. They never did anything like that at [school]. At [school], they didn't really listen and didn't really care. When I tried to speak to the deputy head, he just wouldn't listen, he never really dealt with me very well when I was upset or angry. So, it never ended. Well, it just ended up with everything escalated."

[David, autistic, middle social class] [Wave 2]

Agency in navigating stigma (1)

- Some young people were seen however to reject learning support post-GCSE as a means of distancing themselves from past stigma and discrimination
  - "I got asked when I started college, whether I wanted in-class support like a TA. But I refused. I said that I was brought up very independent. So, when there's like a teacher shadowing me - I don't like the feeling of it. I say to my friends that I forget most of the time that I'm disabled. Like I don't see myself as disabled, I just see myself as someone who just walks a bit weird. So, I don't want to be treated any different to any other student. You've got rights to say what you need at college or what you want to happen with your learning...."

  [Zoe, physically disabled, low social class] [Wave 2]

Agency in navigating stigma (2)

- "I don't [receive any support] because I told [the college] like not to... Yeah, cuz of my EHCP plan, I have a lot of stuff that I could use but I choose not to. The only support that I really receive is being able to use a laptop in an exam. And 25% extra time… I was offered a one-to-one mentor, which I didn't want because that would make me stand out… And that's not what I want, because academically I don't need it. And also socially, I don't want a teacher hanging around with us."

[Ryan, autistic, middle social class]

Ongoing consequences of stigma

- Enduring trauma and poor mental health from past educational experiences were seen in some cases to impact upon post-GCSE transitions and subsequent educational trajectories.

    - "For months I was expecting to go in there and sort of have a new experience. And sort of, be happy, be fulfilled and all the rest of it. But when I got in that building the atmosphere was exactly the same as school. I could smell everything that happened in that school was in that college…. Well I left there and I knew I was not going to go back. So that was it."

    [Matthew, physically disabled, autistic, middle social class] [Wave 2]

Negative experiences – ongoing structural barriers

- Discrimination in enrolment with sixth forms/colleges denying entry to young people on the basis that they are unable to meet needs
- Learning support departments becoming increasingly stretched post-COVID leading to reductions in support provision
- Lack of local authority funding for young people to attend specialist provision

- Agency only enabled by structural circumstances; young people's trajectories structurally determined
- Autistic young people most at risk – accounts of falling out of education/ continuing to struggle due to being reliant on depleted support.
- Impact on self-esteem, compromised expectations ("psycho-emotional disablism")

Compromised Trajectories

- **Andrew (autistic, middle social class)**

- Wave 1 –
  - Experienced severe bullying throughout school.
  - Changed schools on multiple occasions due to the severity of bullying.
  - Impact on confidence, independence, social and emotional wellbeing.
- Wave 2 –
  - Experienced a rise in bullying in sixth form and the withdrawal of much of his support due to limited resources because of COVID.
  - Lowered grades, emotional and social wellbeing.
  - Feeling of powerlessness – teachers ignoring his calls for greater support.

"It's the speed of the work… not being helped at all, not having people explain things…I don't have one to ones anymore, because they just stopped doing that…and whenever school promises me, they're gonna do it again, [it] never happens. Whenever school promises they're going to walk between lessons [with me], [it] never happens… I feel a bit betrayed"

Concluding Remarks

- Early inequalities in school experiences (by social class and disability type) go on to affect what disabled young people do post-GCSE (including academic vs vocational routes)

- Stigma also seen to have an enduring impact on young people's mental health, self-esteem and educational trajectories

- Post-GCSE transition is a turning point in the lives of adolescents – a period in which young people exercise choice and see themselves as active agents in the transition process (Carroll and Dockrell, 2012)

- But agency remains 'bounded' by structural constraints, which are particularly prominent for disabled young people in the current climate.

- Disability as context dependent, becoming more salient in certain environments

Conclusion – Summary of Findings (2)

- Important to continue to monitor young people's journeys to understand barriers and enablers and mechanisms through which socioeconomic disadvantage is reproduced.
- Disabled young people may change settings several times post-secondary and are far more likely to drop out than their non-disabled peers (Velthuis & Chatzitheochari, 2021).
  - Autistic young people at greatest risk of disengagement (Toor et al., 2016).
- Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) is key to study unfolding journeys and underlying processes as opposed to focusing on one specific moment in time in the lives of disabled young people.
- Intersectional perspectives and lived experience key to understanding reproduction of inequality

Thank you!

- Project webpage: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/projects/isc/educationalpathways/educationalpathways

- Twitter @DisTransitions