

## Journal Editor's introduction

Welcome to the fourth 'journal corner' where we offer curriculum friendly summaries of papers published in the BSA journal *Sociology*. These are accompanied by an informal interview with authors.

In this journal corner, we look at “**Disability, Social Class and Stigma: An Intersectional Analysis of Disabled Young People's School Experiences**” – written by Dr Stella Chatzitheochari and Dr Angharad Butler-Rees

This article was recently awarded the SAGE prize for Innovation and Excellence. Whilst offering important insights into the interplays between disability and social class in shaping the educational experiences of disabled young people, the paper touches on important themes across the curriculum - including education, stratification and research methods.

As always, we hope that this will inspire wide-ranging, and critical, discussion.

Best wishes

The Editors of *Sociology*

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## **Disability, social class and stigma: An intersectional analysis of disabled young people's school experiences**

This study explores how disability and social class intersect to shape the experiences of stigma among disabled young people in mainstream schools in England. The research is part of a broader project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, focused on understanding the educational pathways and work outcomes of disabled young people in England. By adopting an intersectional lens, this study challenges the conventional view that stigma experienced by disabled young people is uniform, instead highlighting the significant role of social class in shaping these experiences. This article touches on important themes across the curriculum, including:

**Research Methods:** The study draws on data from the first wave of a qualitative longitudinal project that began in March 2021. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 young people with autism, dyslexia or physical disabilities. These participants were recruited from mainstream schools across England, with efforts made to include participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, although ultimately the researchers struggled to recruit lower social class participants, and most participants were from middle or upper class backgrounds.

The study was designed to understand the lived experiences of disabled young people from different social class backgrounds, as well as the different forms of stigma they encounter in school settings. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to explore a wide range of topics, including disability, school experiences, family life and future expectations. The interviews were conducted online or by phone, with remote data collection necessary due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the challenges of this approach, the researchers were able to gain deep insights into the experiences of the participants, documenting both the commonalities and differences in their experiences of stigma.

**Power/Stratification:** One of the key contributions of this study is its focus on the intersection of disability and social class—a dimension that has been largely overlooked in both social stratification research and disability studies. The research reveals that disabled young people's experiences of stigma are not solely determined by their disability but are also significantly shaped by their social class background. Participants from working-class families, for instance, were more likely to report experiencing inadequate support in school, such as insufficient exam provisions and learning support assistants (LSAs) who do not fully address their needs. These participants were also more likely to have encountered exclusionary practices, which exacerbated their sense of being stigmatised and marginalised within the school environment.

In contrast, participants from middle- and upper-class backgrounds were attending schools with better resources and more inclusive special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision. They typically had access to private assessments, tuition and other forms of support that help to mitigate the effects of their disability and reduce their exposure to stigma. The research found that this disparity is partly due to the advantages that middle- and upper-class parents have in navigating the

educational system and securing the necessary support for their children. As a result, young people from this background may be less likely to experience structural discrimination and better protected from the negative attitudes and behaviours (interactional discrimination) that can arise from teachers and peers in less inclusive environments.

The study also explored the concept of stigma consciousness, which refers to the awareness among some disabled young people of being stigmatised due to their condition. This consciousness was particularly prevalent among participants who had experienced both structural and interactional discrimination. These young people described often engaging in 'masking', a coping strategy where they conceal aspects of their identity to fit in with their peers. While masking may help disabled young people avoid some negative social interactions, it is associated with significant psychological costs, including stress and anxiety, which can have long-term effects on their mental health and well-being.

Identity: The study's intersectional approach provides a clear example of how multiple axes of identity – in this case, disability and social class – intersect to produce and reproduce social inequalities. The researchers emphasise that disability is not a homogeneous category; instead, different types of disabilities (e.g., autism, dyslexia, physical disabilities) and different social class backgrounds result in varied experiences of stigma and discrimination. For instance, the study found that autistic and physically disabled young people were more likely to report stigmatising encounters than dyslexic young people, who may be less visible and have fewer support needs in a context of better awareness and resourcing for supporting these young people in schools.

Education policy: In terms of implications, the study highlights the need for educational policies that address the specific needs of disabled young people from working-class backgrounds. The researchers argue that focusing solely on academic attainment and employment outcomes is insufficient to improve the long-term socioeconomic trajectories of disabled young people. Instead, a more comprehensive approach is needed, one that considers the psychological impacts of exclusion and the importance of inclusive educational environments.

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## **Can you tell us what led you to write this paper?**

This research was conducted as part of a project on *Educational Pathways and Work Outcomes of Disabled Young people in England*, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. I had started my work on disability inequalities back in 2013 as postdoctoral researcher on a ESRC Secondary Data Analysis Initiative Project on disabled children and young people, led by Professor Lucinda Platt. It was during that time that I found myself more and more interested in social class and its role in the lives of disabled young people. I thought it was a great omission for both mainstream social stratification research and disability studies that the intersection of disability status and social class had been empirically neglected. At the same time, I felt quite limited by the use of binary disability status categories and felt that there was great value in comparing experiences of people with different impairments and conditions. It seemed obvious to me that there are different “ableisms” and forms of discrimination and that we needed empirical studies on this.

My interest in stigma had started early on since my first paper on disability, which had also been published in *Sociology*. We had documented the increased risk of bullying victimisation faced by disabled students in school settings in England. I started thinking about the long-term effects of othering processes and the role that stigmatisation of mind-body differences play in the reproduction of social inequality. I was particularly keen to turn my focus on structural forms of stigma that very often affect disabled young people in mainstream school settings and explore how these are interlinked with more interpersonal forms of stigmatization. As my ultimate goal is to understand effects of stigmatization on socioeconomic trajectories of disabled young people in adulthood, this study was a great starting point, allowing me to document young people’s experiences from diagnosis to age 16.

## **What conclusions would you like people to draw from the study?**

That disability inequalities need to be understood through an intersectional lens. Our study clearly shows that disabled young people are a very heterogeneous group, subject to different forms and levels of discrimination and stigma. I would like to think that the study will contribute to a clearer understanding of the disproportionate barriers faced by working class disabled people in school settings – this is crucial for policy, it needs to become clear that solely focusing on the employment side of things is not sufficient to improve socioeconomic outcomes for this group. And I am not just thinking about academic attainment here, I am also referring to psychological impacts of exclusion. Finally, there is another finding that I find

really important – that “perceived typicality” rather than group membership is most important for stigmatisation. I hope to work a lot more on this issue in the near future.

**It is really interesting that you use qualitative methods here. I know a lot of your other work draws on quantitative data. Can you say a little more about why you designed the study this way?**

Although I am frequently labelled a quantitative sociologist, I am in fact quite pragmatic in my choice of methods and let my research questions rather than my expertise dictate my research design. With this study, I wanted to gain an understanding of disabled young people’s lived experiences of stigma in school settings in order to subsequently explore how these experiences influence their trajectories. Survey data provide indirect measures of stigma at best, and I wanted to go a lot deeper than that. I had always been fascinated by qualitative longitudinal studies and the way they allow researchers to see how individual lives unfold. I remain very excited about interviewing our study members every few years.

Aside from its longitudinal and qualitative component, I wanted the research design to be intersectional to allow the study of joint effects of disability status and social class on young people’s lives. We recruited young people from three different parental social classes and three impairment groups in order to facilitate comparisons of groups with combinations of different characteristics. This was quite challenging. For example, while children and youth from working class backgrounds are more likely to become disabled, they are also very hard to recruit for research purposes due to their invisibility and lack of connections. We had to try many different avenues and recruitment took substantially longer than expected but it was important to insist, especially since a shortcoming of earlier studies is their reliance on middle-class samples and the lack of working-class perspectives. An additional layer of complexity came from the fact that many of the disabled young people we interviewed had overlapping conditions, which meant that assigning them to a single impairment group was not very straightforward. We therefore asked young people to name their primary impairment but investigated experiences linked to different conditions and their interactions during the interview.

**What are you currently working on?**

We are preparing for a third wave of data collection. It will be really exciting to see where our study members are at age 20 and hear about their experiences in the last couple of years. I am also completing a British Academy study on a fairly similar topic, focusing on disabled young people from working class backgrounds that are not in education, employment, or training.