What inspired you to study educational change?

As a teacher involved in Special Educational Needs and Disability Education for over fifteen years, it is difficult for me, despite my passion for the field, to feel positively about the current state of Disability Education. These mixed feelings stem from the challenges Disabled people experience relative to their opportunities, recognition, and participation in education and beyond. These challenges exist despite national efforts to enhance these elements for disabled people. Indeed, since the 1990s, the United Kingdom has passed a number of educational reforms and it was during this era that An Act on Disability Discrimination (Disability Discrimination Act, 1997) was enacted. This bill was the first piece of UK legislature that specifically granted rights of accessibility to employment, spaces and transport to Disabled people.

While aimed at improving the lives of Disabled people, since its passage Disabled people’s participation in many spheres of British life has declined due to rapid changes in life and society. For example, while social media has changed the way people communicate and work, only 49% of disabled people used social media in the three months prior to August 2017, compared with 71% of people without disabilities (Ons.gov.uk., 2019). Additionally, research from Disability Rights UK, a lobbying group, suggests Disabled students still find themselves singled out at university and made to feel ‘different from the norm’ and ‘like a problem to be solved’ (Economic and Social Research Council and Bath Spa University, 2018).

These are just some of the experiences which make it more difficult for Disabled people to thrive in a variety of settings, and is what inspires me to consider education for change. For students without disability, the constraints and challenges of living in a disabled body are unknown, and by including the struggles of Disabled people in curricula, able-bodied students may appreciate the need for greater diversity and accessibility in all walks of life. I
hope, therefore, in the not so distant future, I can use my work to talk about the great strides in policy and practice increasing Disabled people’s access and success in education.

What and/or who inspires you in the field? Why?

In terms of academic inspiration, my work references two main theories. Nancy Fraser’s (1997) three-dimensional approach to social justice and, in particular, “Parity of Participation,” that proffers the idea that social justice can only be achieved once all adult members of a society can participate in that society as peers. I also draw heavily on Amartya Sen’s (1999) “Capability Approach,” which defines social justice as how much each person within a society can achieve “functionings,” that is, how far they are able to achieve the things that they feel are important.

My current research focuses on how to reframe Relationships and Sex Education through an accessible lens. For me, the current UK curriculum does not go far enough for any student in providing a good basis for experiencing healthy relationships, but in the case of Disabled people it falls especially short. Currently, the main focus of this curriculum is on prevention of abuse rather than development of relationships. I think all young people deserve to experience healthy relationships, so, for me, my scholarship has to be about them, always.

What do you believe to be the biggest challenge for educational change and what would be a first step to address this challenge?

In the United Kingdom, I believe a first step to address the balance of power between students of different abilities is the abolition of school league tables. Our school league tables assign point values to a school’s exam results for students above a Grade 4. As a result, students who are less likely to achieve these grades through Special Educational Need or Disability status are often seen as a hindrance to a school’s measured performance. If schools were judged based on their provision of high-quality education that allowed all students to make progress, even if this progress was small, and not at the standard minimum grade, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) students would potentially become equally valued to their peers.

What are some new areas of inquiry and/or directions you think the field should be headed?

Accessibility as a whole is an issue that needs to be addressed in education. In the UK, the majority of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are educated in mainstream schools rather than separate special schools. In 2018, there were 399,802 students with SEND in mainstream schools compared to 117,889 in special schools (Department for Education Statistical First Release, 2018). These students follow the same curricula as their peers, with only basic

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accommodations made to meet their needs. For issues such as Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), they often are not even offered curriculum. In the area of RSE, as we move towards a compulsory curriculum in the UK in 2020, we need more work in educational change to be oriented towards the needs of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. In particular, we need a curriculum that accounts for differences in communication and conceptualization, that allows for accessible language or even visual representation to be used in clarifying sex and relationship concepts, and that takes account of the real-world situations likely to be experienced by students including safe sex, pregnancy and consent.

References

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Helen Dring is a Special Educational Needs Coordinator and English teacher from Liverpool, England. She has worked in the field of special education for over fifteen years and is a PhD candidate in Education and Social Justice at Lancaster University. Her research draws on Nancy Fraser’s theory of parity of participation in reference to the development of a comprehensive Relationships and Sex Education curriculum for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.