

book reviews

Disabled children: Challenging social exclusion

Laura Middleton

Blackwell Science, Oxford, 1999, 164 pp.

It is relatively rare for people with a disability to be asked to talk about their experiences and relationships and the way in which services (or lack of them) impact on their lives. *Disabled children: Challenging social exclusion* is therefore unusual, as the book originated in discussions with disabled students at the University of Central Lancashire, UK, about their childhood experiences. While the book does not exclude the voices of parents and professionals, its core focus is on the needs of young people with disabilities, from their own perspective.

The author, Laura Middleton, states in the Preface that, in writing the book, she is exploring a key question – ‘what is the justification for treating disabled children differently?’ (p.ix). The themes which emerge from this question, and from the discussions with the young people, cover: community attitudes towards disability; stigma and low self-esteem; the lack of positive role models; personal abuse; institutional abuse; and professional service systems.

The first chapter, which sets the tone of the book, presents the voices of the young people on families, friends, abuse, education, choices, medical interventions and images of disability. This is followed by chapters on: why and how disadvantage occurs; conceptual frameworks to understand the processes involved in change; and the challenges of, and possibilities for, personal, professional and organisational change. At the end of each chapter is an excellent summary, which leads on to the next chapter.

The book concludes with a chapter entitled ‘Disabled children: Excluded citizens’, which explores citizenship as it

relates to children with disabilities, before moving on to propose clear strategies for change.

Some of the things which stood out for me while I was reading this book were:

- The need to consult children whenever possible about their needs;
- The concern that, in order to receive support, parents may have to present their children as more disabled than they actually are;
- The issue of respite care and how this may reinforce the stigmatisation of the child, as well as feelings of being a burden;
- The concern that children with disabilities in foster care are thought to be more likely than other children to experience abuse of various kinds;
- The need to employ adults with disabilities as staff members and advocates in organisations which provide services to children with disabilities.

Although *Disabled children: Challenging social exclusion* describes the UK context, it has considerable relevance for Australian policy and practice and is recommended reading.

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Taking extra care

Respite, shared and permanent care for children with disabilities

Hedi Argent and Ailie Kerrane

British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, London, 1997, 96 pp.

This book, which is very different to the one reviewed above, is a practical manual on finding alternative placements for children with disabilities, working with these children and supporting both birth and permanent families before and after placement.

The structure of *Taking extra care* is clear and the text very readable. Chapters are divided into two sections, each of

which informs the other. The practice guide, which details the ‘how to’ with illustrative vignettes, has been written by Hedi Argent. Ailie Kerrane’s contribution is largely a diary which records her experience in developing a local authority service for children with disabilities.

One of the strengths of this book is that it challenges practice assumptions and invites professionals to think and plan