Response to Responses:

Raising Awareness isn’t Enough: The Role of the Psychology of Education in Disability-Related Justice and Inclusion in Primary Classrooms

Sian E Jones

Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK
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Since writing my Open Dialogue piece, and sending it into the world, I have been bowled over by the responses, first from the reviewers, and then from researchers who have taken the time to carefully read the initial piece and to verbalise their own responses to it. Many in so doing, have shared something very valuable of their own experiences of disability in the spheres of Psychology and/or Education. For me, it has been a privilege and a pleasure to read these responses, and I am very thankful to the editorial team of the BPS Education section for the opportunity to do so, and for their own hard work in bringing this idea for an Open Dialogue into being. What I offer now is a reflection on the responses, alongside what I am tentatively framing as a ‘call to action’ among everyone working in the Psychology of Education, to join us in enhancing disability literacy and working towards disability-related social justice. I maintain here my focus on primary classrooms, but have on occasion strayed beyond this, as you will see, and welcome your thinking and action on expanding changes to our practice across the Psychology of Education, writ large.

Mirrors, Windows and Broken Glass: Reflections on the Responses

A proposition surrounding the role of metaphorical mirrors and windows in educational settings may be traced back to Bishop (1990). In line with Bishop’s contention that being able to see yourself and people who are different from you in the curriculum is critical to belonging and understanding respectively, several of the respondents have offered
disabled readers of this issue of *PER* mirrors, and non-disabled readers ‘windows’ into the worlds of disabled adults and children. Each respondent, whether they openly identify as disabled or not, raises different points around the role of Psychology in disability literacy in the (primary) classroom. I have collected the points together under broad themes, as many respondents consolidated the thinking of each other, as well as bringing their unique perspective to the table. I also offer some additional reflections around each point below.

**A Language of Privilege.** Many respondents reflected on the language that is used in our discipline to describe disabled people. Firstly, Milne writes about the nature of hiddenness and invisibility when it comes to disability. Similar to the issues with colour-blind approaches noted by Sapoun-Shevin (2017) that I highlighted, Milne points out, quite rightly, that the notion of ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ differences rather ironically privileges eyesight as the (only) means to see disability. As Milne (this issue) asserts, “my disability is not invisible. My access needs are not invisible. I am not invisible” (p. xx). Instead, she advocates for Price’s (2011) distinction between ‘apparent’, ‘intermittently apparent’, and ‘nonapparent’ disabilities. In a similar vein, Gallant (this issue) offers the alternative term, ‘colour evasion’, instead of colour-blindness, from Schwarzenthal, et al. (2020) - an excellent suggestion. We know as psychologists that language can affect conceptual thinking (e.g., Vigliocco et al., 2005) and Milne and Gallant underline the ways in which our language use can privilege being non-disabled over being disabled. I am increasingly aware of ableism in our day-to-day language: Have you ever been *paralysed* by fear? Or come up
with a *lame* excuse? What meanings do the italicised words have? Part of our disability literacy needs to examine our language use, its privilege.

Indeed, as several responders note, *language* and the *categorization* of disabled people both by themselves and by others remains at the heart of the matter. Gallant (this issue) reflects on the use of ‘typically developing’, whilst Jayman and Gudbrandsen (this issue) note that ‘developmental delay’ is a feature of the condition which they study. This may lead us to the question: whose development is delayed? A question all the more pertinent when one considers the colonial roots of so-called developmental milestones (e.g., Burmann, 2017). What Goodley (2024) describes as a process of de-pathologisation of university education, is (as he notes) closely paralleled with our attempts to decolonise, and critically examine our educational knowledge. Earlier in his career, Goodley (2010) pointed out that concepts of ‘normal development’ and ‘play’ mixed together do not serve disabled children well; accordingly, he encouraged childhood researchers to deconstruct their own conceptions around ‘normality’, ‘development’, ‘disability’ and ‘play’. Yet, in their paper, Moriña and Carnerero (2022) showed that most of the studies they reviewed in Education were linked to the deficit or medical model ways of conceiving of disability, finding that this discourse is coupled with negative attitudes. In echo of Goodley, I argue for a de-pathologisation of the Psychology of Education, that uses a social or affirmative model discourse to write about disability.

This might be achieved, as I suggested, through the reclamation of language, to form positive and affirming identities where deficit-based conceptions of disability once reigned supreme. Raven (this issue) notes “about one third of pupils in the current school
system are treated as disabled (i.e., as lacking one or more deemed-to-be-important “abilities”) (p. xx). Remedios (this issue) writes about a student “with some deficit (e.g., dyslexia)” (p. xx). For me, this is the problem: that “being disabled” is automatically synonymous with being “lesser than”. The paradox that Milne and McAteer (both this issue) note, is that the benefits of diagnosis for accessing medical intervention are inextricably coupled with deficit-based thinking. McAteer’s writing reminded me of work by Warnock (2005) on the ‘dilemma of difference’. That is, she and McAteer write about a tension between recognizing the distinctions among children in order to provide tailored support, potentially leading to labelling and division, on the one hand, and on the other hand, providing a standardized education, which may neglect the specific requirements of individual children. What I would argue, in response to this tension, is that classrooms and classroom material needs to be fundamentally re-designed to meet the needs of all learners before the learners arrive at the school. In other words, learners need to have access to the curriculum to enable their participation from the get-go – and funding and capacity must allow for this. Here, principles of universal design for learning may be employed (cf. Behling & Tobin, 2018), so that barriers that prevent access to the curriculum for disabled learners are removed for all learners. Alongside this, instead of a medical model frame, I am in favour of children and adults in education systems being able to claim an identity as “disabled” (to categorize themselves as such, too) if they so wish, and for that identity to be grounded in a positive affirmation of who they are, as a whole person in their own right, in line with affirmative models of disability. As Jayman and Gudbrandsen (this issue) discovered in their co-created research, when young people
could tell their narratives in their own words, they were empowered, “...I ended up doing
the presentation and some other teachers came in to listen to me....I think some of the
pupils slightly understood me a bit better.” (p. xx). In arguing that we enhance disability
literacy, I am arguing for our literacy and language in that regard to be positive and
affirming. Disability is not a dirty word.

A Discipline of Privilege. Remedios (this issue) argues that whilst systemic change is not
unwanted, "psychology can only ever be about providing evidence; it cannot be about
changing systems ...the decisions that go into system at local, national, or international
level are beyond the remit of psychology”. (p. xx). He also highlights that individual
differences are missing from the lines of enquiry that I put forward. I disagree that
systemic change is beyond the remit of Psychology. I have come to an understanding that
all research evidence, rather than being a neutral positivist accumulation of knowledge, is
political, because it all, once publicly available, can maintain or disrupt “the way things
are” (Reicher & Haslam, 2013). It is for a similar reason that individual differences are
indeed largely missing from the questions that I propose. Just as the student to whom
Remedios refers is unlikely to want support because of something that they have learnt
about that support, or about their identity as dyslexic in social context, I would argue that
what the psychology of education construes as individual differences, such as resilience,
support-seeking or wellbeing cannot be separated from the social and material contexts in
which they form and develop (e.g., Midlands Psychology Group, 2022).
A recent disability-justice-related example of this, and of the ways in which psychology contributes to social status quo may be given in a focus on unconscious bias training (UBT) in higher education. These are training courses which aim to address racism, sexism, ableism and other prejudices by raising participants’ awareness of so-called ‘unconscious biases’ they hold (Moller et al., 2023). There is now a wealth of evidence, recently reviewed by Moller et al. showing that (1) there is considerable variation in what counts as UBT, and (2) that the bias is unlikely to be unconscious at all. Moreover, Moller et al. (2023) point out that through an understanding of UBT’s function as raising awareness of a problem located in individual minds, its use allows higher education institutions to attend to individual feelings and behaviour, whilst leaving structural inequalities and barriers to inclusion unchanged. By not paying attention to the structural barriers, in favour of a focus on individual minds, the psychology of UBT has actively played a role in maintaining current social hierarchies.

Remedios (this issue) further argues that “Psychology is a science and as such, the aim of psychology should always be to examine the nature of the phenomenon unencumbered by an end goal that the findings may (or may not) serve” (p. xx). The Psychology of Education, as I argue above, does not produce a body of neutral evidence. It cannot proceed in a vacuum, divorced of its social, moral or political context. A stark reminder of this may be seen in the way that intelligence, conceived of as an individual trait by educational psychologists legitimized the 11-plus test and in turn, led many children into secondary modern schools with lower quality educational provision (e.g., Midlands Psychology Group, 2022). Psychological research can and has led to structural change and
social injustice. A lack of certainty around the outcome and unintended impact of research means that I must consider the ways in which my findings may be used, and the ways in which my research may serve, or further marginalize, the communities that are (overwhelmingly, at the moment) the subject of the research field (as opposed to being the researchers). As such, from a position of low non-disabled privilege, and as a researcher, I will maintain a focus on how my research could be used in the world. I will design (alongside educators) and evaluate (using scientific methods and with an awareness of the impact on the research of my identity as a disabled adult) interventions that may or may not demonstrate increased disability literacy in classrooms. Remedios is right; I will never know what the outcome (increased, none, or decreased disability literacy) will be. But I will pay attention to the ways in which any of those possibilities may be construed, and to the ways in which we can make our discipline in itself less ableist, by challenging non-disabled privilege, and consciously disrupting a social status quo that understands (and indeed writes about) disabled people as lesser, if it reports on them at all.

**Representation and Disability Literacy in the Curriculum.** Returning to the notion of the invisibility of disability, several respondents noted the very real invisibility of disability in classrooms, and in education more generally, owing to a lack of representation in children’s material culture. The lack of representation in children’s material culture is, as both Milne and Lloyd and Daw (this issue) contend, something to which psychologists of education can attend. As Milne and I note, we now have a multitude of studies across Psychology and Education pointing to the effectiveness of helpful representation. What is
important then, is ensuring that we don’t introduce ‘broken glass’ – unhelpful stereotypes – as has been seen in research to date (e.g., Beckett et al., 2010; Leung, 2023) and as noted by Milne (this issue). Part of the problem here, as Raven (this issue) notes, is that much of the curriculum and policy is drawn up, for disabled people, by non-disabled people. The lack of representation in the curriculum is a natural reflection of those who created it.

But this invisibility extends beyond representation. As Milne, McAteer, Ally and Daw (this issue) note, disability literacy is also currently missing in action from Education. At the moment, in Scotland, we have a Curriculum for Excellence which does not have any benchmark relating to disability. The closest is one first-level benchmark that reads, “I recognise that each individual has a unique blend of abilities and needs. I contribute to making my school community one which values individuals equally and is a welcoming place for all. HWB 1-10a”. In England, the Key Stages curriculum similarly gives us no specific reference to disability. There is, however, one reference to those with ‘differences’ within Key Stage 2 ‘Citizenship/ PSHE’: “developing good relationships and respecting those with differences” (Department for Education, 2015). Are we not all different from each other? What differences are being referred to (and which are being implicitly privileged) in this learning outcome?

A corollary of this lack of attention in the UK curricula to disability literacy is a vast range of attitudes towards disability, as seen in teachers, and as highlighted by Newson (this issue). As she and I note, the research tells us that some teachers will go above and beyond to work inclusively in their classrooms, in turn bolstering the self-esteem of their learners, whilst others’ negative attitudes might see them go as far as segregating students
(Hehir et al., 2016) and / or blaming the settings themselves. I agree wholeheartedly with Newson (this issue) that teachers’ attitudes should not determine the quality of educational provision for disabled learners. What I see at the same time, is an education system that is under-resourced, and that does not offer aspiring or practising teachers anything meaningful in the UK, in terms of disability literacy. Such teacher-education, I would suggest, would empower teachers in the classroom to call-out under-resourcing and ableism, and to call-in their learners and colleagues towards the normalizing of disability and inclusive pedagogy. Instead, the ‘colour-evasive’ approach in the curricula to disability (which extends to not even using the word ‘disability’), together with a lack of disability representation, currently gives a very loud message to learners: disability is a dirty word; disabled people do not belong here. Moreover, this evasiveness contributes to the systemic disadvantage experienced by disabled learners and educators alike.

Newson (this issue) points out, quite fairly, that my original piece is academic in focus, and offers little in the way of concrete steps teachers can take to enhance a sense of belonging. As Milne (this issue) notes, our work in the Toy Box Diversity Lab is beginning to set this out in an evidence-based way. In response, for now, I would encourage educators to consider whether and how they represent disabled people in their classrooms. Are they depicted on teaching slide decks? Are they to be found in the books in the library (and not in a special section on disability)? In early years classrooms, are they among the dolls that children can play with? And if they are among those dolls, are they in the hospital corner, or the home corner? Can the doll using the wheelchair be the doctor? I have written a more teacher-focussed chapter (see Jones et al., 2022) with more information for the interested
reader, and Favazza and Odom (1997) offer a disability-representation audit that teachers can undertake of their schools. What I would argue, for teachers, is that research evidence tells us that normalizing representation of disability in classrooms is key.

**Silence and Ableism.** Another way of capturing the ‘colour-evasive’ approach to disability would be one of ‘dysconscious ableism’. Rather than seeing ableism as unconscious, (cf. UBT), dysconscious bias refers to the mindless acceptance of the prevailing norms and privileges of ableism (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). It is the deep-set nature of ableism in education that Lloyd and Daw (this issue) reflect upon in their response. As disabled adults, trustees of the LUNA project, and with an academic background themselves, they are well-positioned to focus on both the direct and indirect barriers to education that are the result of this ableism. For adults, they note several access barriers around training, attitudes towards reasonable adjustments, and access to the workplace, inexperienced staff, and not being able to form community with disabled colleagues (since these colleagues are not there). As students, it does not surprise me to learn that they have been exposed to ableist views in psychology and education literature and in lectures (I remember uncritical lectures on Wing and Gould’s (1979) triad of impairments theory of autism, too, alongside the “debilitating loss” that necessarily accompanies stroke - which was news to me having had one). And, as Lloyd and Daw (this issue) note, the rewarding of attendance in schools, alongside the UK Government’s recent campaign (Department for Education, 2024) reinforces the notion that illness and non-attendance are deficit, and that presenteeism, rather than participation is what matters. It is also, as they state, somewhat
at odds with an education system which stops disabled children going on trips and attending lessons when their access needs cannot be met. Lloyd and Daw (this issue) also point to disabled young people and their teachers not having the language to talk about their disability due to the culture of silence and lack of confidence among educators. In solidarity, I recall one Home Economics lesson, where the teacher, on learning of my hemiplegia for the first time (as Lloyd, Daw, Newson, and Milne state, why is the burden on disabled students to share information?), when I asked for assistance to hold something, subsequently banned me from taking part in the practical lesson at all, as I was a health and safety risk. Similarly, it was only when my Music teacher ‘caught’ me playing piano in a non-teaching session, that he became desperate to sign me up for GCSE Music, that same teacher having fail-graded me for every assessment that year, as my right hand closed up in nervous-ness at performance, rendering me unable to play in front of an audience. If you wondered, I had asked; the teacher actively refused to discuss alternative assessments, or the impact of my disability. I did not do GCSE Music. I am not alone in this type of experience. The SQA refused to offer Eilidh Elizabeth Molly McGrath Higher Dance in 2019 (see Cerebral Palsy Scotland, n.d.), Shifting (and at least sharing) the locus of responsibility for reasonable adjustments in our Education system clearly needs attention, as do ableist practices and assumptions around effective reward systems (a domain of psychological research) and what is seen as ‘fair assessment’.

**Friendship and Othering.** Lloyd and Daw (this issue), as part of their work with the LUNA project, focus on the role of friendship, against a backdrop of research (as cited in my
opening piece) showing that disabled peers are less likely to be accepted by, and more likely to be bullied by, their non-disabled counterparts. McAteer (this issue) further reflects on the importance of the social aspects of education in her piece. Drawing on research by Koller (2017) and her own personal experience of exclusion, she focuses on the social inclusion of disabled children. Similarly, Lloyd and Daw (this issue) point to the experiences of the LUNA team; they wanted my student-teachers to know “... that disability can make more than just learning in class difficult. It can make the social aspect that comes with school really alienating.” (B). (p. xx). Indeed, whilst the focus in our education system remains standards-driven and grade-oriented, this aspect of education may well be lost, and points to our need to ask, as Raven (this issue) implicitly does, more fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of our education system.

Further important reflection on fitting in and othering is offered by Newson (this issue). She notes that young children don’t have the same approach as older children and adults to asking about disability. The tension though is with older children, who don’t want to be seen to be different in any way (as my opening paper also attests). In an earlier piece, reviewing the literature on how children understand ‘disability’ (Jones, 2021), I concur with this view, opening by stating that “we would do well to bear in mind that a child’s understandings [of disability] are not necessarily less valid than our own. Indeed, we might do well to learn from them” (p. 85). I could sum up that 2021 piece by saying that children’s understanding of disability is learnt from the adults around them and tends to converge towards it as they get older. Like Newson, I look forward to a time when classrooms are inclusive, and disability is so normalized as a part of our society and education systems,
that disabled children and adults, the different ways that they access the curriculum, are not seen as anything out of the ordinary, and the tension that Newson notes is no longer a concern.

**Voice.** Newson’s (this issue) first point around the disability-related justice in classrooms is around the employment and voice of disabled teachers. In line with the statistics I reported, Newson (this issue) affirms that she has never knowingly interviewed a prospective disabled teacher. She also sees this as something that we need to change, because disabled educators, with their lived experiences and reflections can act as role models (as mirror and as window) and because disabled educators should have the opportunity to voice their experiences of systemic barriers in education settings (as I have been fortunate enough to do in university settings). Great strides are being taken in academic research to centre the experiences of autistic teachers (see Wood, 2022). I would argue that Wood’s (2022) book would act as an excellent template for providing a forum for hearing from (practising or aspiring) disabled psychologists and educators more generally.

Identifying as someone who has ADHD, Gallant echoes the need for this space. In her piece, Gallant says, “we all have a story to tell and there is great value in sharing our journeys” (this issue, p. xx). The problem, as Gallant sees it, and I concur, is that our stories remain hidden. Much of my opening paper is concerned with an absence of data. As Gallant points out, diversity data, when you at the intersections, like she and I are (I am LGBT+ and disabled) makes you easily identifiable, so analysing our experiences often
doesn’t happen. This is echoed in BPS EDI data: following up on my email in the opening paper, within the membership, the BPS Diversity and Inclusion team hold EDI data for 29.7% of the total membership. They replied that “membership [category level data – e.g., being in the BPS Education section] is more challenging to unpick due to EDI data being low in some membership labels and high in others. This lack of consistency in the 29.7% skews the data and therefore it would not be accurate or useful” (BPS Diversity and Inclusion, personal communication, March 18th, 2024). Low numbers again, this time for BPS Divisions and Sections, mean no reporting.

The lack of reporting of diversity data in psychological research has been shown to be endemic (Richmond et al., 2015). Small sample size or not, not reporting participants who identify as, for example, disabled, non-binary, or from a minoritized ethnicity, only serves to erase them and invalidate their narratives further. I would also add that this privilege is not just seen in what Psychology reports, but in how it reports. As psychologists Hegarty and Bruckmüller (2013) pointed out, over ten years ago, when we are comparing privileged and non-privileged groups, the privileged group’s data is often put first, or left-most, in languages reading from left to right. Here then, are three challenges for researchers in this field: to research the systemic barriers to the teaching profession experienced by disabled educators; to collect and to consider how to report diversity data without erasing our stories, and to consider ways of not privileging already privileged groups in the reporting of those data.

More hopefully, when it comes to voice, Jayman and Gudbrandsen (this issue) report their research study directly seeking and platforming the voice of disabled children.
They took great care to co-construct their research methods, from the research design, through to accessible dissemination of the research findings. In this way, their research actively listens to the voices of their co-researchers. These voices added to the bank of evidence we have concerning disablism among teachers, and to that which we know about parental views around inclusion, their struggle towards understanding and effective educational provision for their child. Alongside this Jayman and Gudbrandsen have named ‘22q Champions’ to help raise awareness and understanding of 22q-Deletion Syndrome. As with LUNA ambassadors (see Lloyd and Daw, this issue), this project shows that positive role models can help challenge negative social perceptions and encourage children to be agents for social change themselves.

A Call to Action

To conclude this Open Dialogue, I leave you with some thoughts in response to the questions that I posed at the end of my opening piece. The below is an attempt to set out concrete actions grounded in that piece, and responses to it, steps that we can take within the Psychology of Education, which go beyond raising awareness of disability, towards greater disability literacy, and in turn, disability-related justice.

Barriers and Accessibility to Education. The respondents and I have all pointed to a number of attitudinal barriers in Education, ranging from the perceptions of educators to the prejudice of other children, and the struggle of parents, families, and disabled adults, for understanding. Many have attested to the value of positive role models for students and
pupils alike. At the same time, most respondents have also reflected something of the internal or external ableism pervasive in UK society. This ranges from conceptions of fair assessment and rewarding attendance, to embarrassment around adjustments, to very real experiences of exclusion from educational experiences and systems. Exploring these attitudes and experiences, and work on developing new non-ableist initiatives and forums for discussion, are all ripe topics of action for the Psychology of Education. Indeed, it is likely that these attitudinal barriers and ableist practices in Education are supporting and perpetuating the very real structural inequalities that disabled people experience in UK society. As such, I call on psychologists to consciously join their thinking and their research, with that of other disciplines, in order to break down these barriers and create a sea change in classroom practice.

**Tackling Ableism in Psychological Research.** Several respondents have echoed my concerns around the ableism that is implicit within our psychological research, from non-collection and / or non-reporting of the diverse nature of our research samples, to the way in which we report our data, and more critically, the language that we use to write about it. I call on researchers to make a conscious and deliberate effort to use language and reporting systems that are inclusive of disabled people and stripped of the ableism currently present within it.

**Raising Disabled People’s Voices.** The absence of diversity data in Psychology of Education as a profession, as well as in the research literature more generally, raises
questions about the extent to which disabled people’s voices are at the table, let alone the extent to which they are valued and heard. The task here then is two-fold. Firstly, to collect these data – to know how representative we are as a profession, and to make efforts to redress a balance if we are found lacking. In our research, and in drawing up recommendations for practice, disabled people’s voices must be present. And secondly, to ensure that we adopt research methods to consult and/or co-research with, and that we have accessible occupation for, both disabled educators, and for disabled psychologists of education.

**Enhancing Disability Literacy and Social / Affirmative Model Practice.** Much of the way that we write about disability in the Psychology of Education continues to use a deficit-based frame of thinking, where disability is associated with ‘loss’ and ‘tragedy’. Following Goodley (2010, 2024), I call on researchers in this field to move away from thinking in terms of ‘normal’ and ‘atypical’ development, and away from medical model thinking about disability in the primary classroom. Instead, I call on them to replace this with writing about disability as a positive part of a person’s identity. Counter to the mainstream focus of Psychology, I ask them to consider the education system, its structures and inaccessibility, as the core issue, rather than the issue being the person – the individual-themselves.

Finally, as I draw this piece to a close, I offer my thanks again, to all who have offered their responses, and who have worked to encourage me in its creation. If you would
like to continue the dialogue, as an ally or in solidarity, please get in touch. In writing these papers, I have become more convinced that coming together we can make a difference.

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