Dan Goodley

What could it mean for disability – and the study of disability – to engage with education? *The Journal of Disability Studies in Education* provides one space in which to respond to this question. The word ‘could’ hints at possibility and a future. Within the question there is, I think, possibility: the notion that disability brings with it something new for education. One might understand this possibility in terms of disruption. Education’s practices and undergirding philosophies often do not have disability in mind. Education, especially mass education, has historically been built upon an assumption of the learner and learning where disability is absent. Mainstream educational practices and institutions assume learners who have nothing to do with disability. Historically, places where disability has been present have often been deemed to be spaces of special education. Disability and special education are readily known to exist together. Special education is where specialist disability knowledge has been produced and reproduced. Mainstream – or mass, typical, usual and normal education – has oftentimes been untouched by disability. When disability touches mainstream education then it creates trouble (with a capital T). Interestingly, these troubles tend to be understood in terms of the problems, tensions and difficulties caused *by* disability *to* education. Disability is clearly disruptive to the taken-for-granted, institutionalised, historically embedded ways in which educational practices are usually imagined and enacted. But what does disability reveal about education? What dominant practices and philosophies – that underpin education – are illuminated by the presence of disability? And in disrupting education by disability’s very presence, what possibilities emerge for reimagining education? Disability’s disruptive potential might be understood in two ways. First, disability demands that we analyse education’s failure to imagine the presence of disability. When educational philosophies, practices and institutions are seemingly incapable of engaging with disability then they are clearly failing. They are deficient, lacking and not...
fit for purpose. Second, disability demands new ways of imagining education that is open to the presence of disability. This openness might be understood in terms of inclusion but we need to unpack what is meant by this term when it has become the stuff of trend and rhetoric. In opening up education to disability this involves interrogating the philosophies and practices of education in order to understand how disability is imagined (if it is imagined at all). Disability’s disruptive potential lies in the possibilities it offers us all to seriously reconsider how we think of and practice education.

Katherine Runswick-Cole

I begin with a question: why do we need disability studies in education? Or, perhaps, if I’m honest, why do I need disability studies in education? My journey into disability studies in education begins with my experience as a mother of two children, one of whom became entangled within the special education system. The discourses and practices of special education have spread across the globe locating the ‘problem’ of disabled children firmly within the child. “Children with special needs’ are constructed in education as sites for ‘specialist intervention’ with the hope of moving them ever closer to the mythical norms of typical development, for fear they will become (future) burdens on the (welfare) state.

When my children were little, I remember my five year old daughter inviting a child in her class home for tea (an evening meal in the North of England!). As the small girl got out of the car, she boldly asked me: ‘is your son a special need?’ I hesitated for a moment, taken aback by the directness of the questioning, and then replied, with no further explanation: ‘he’s a boy’. A small child, just five, has already been enculturated into the discourses and practices of special education. For her, a boy has become ‘a special need’, even the word ‘child’ is missing from her inquiry. The categorisation ‘a special need’ denies my son his status as ‘child’ and confirms his categorisation as ‘other’. Her question marked a dreadful foreshadowing of what was to come as he (and we) struggled to find a way through an English education system that is overtly hostile to disabled children.

I needed disability studies in education to help me to make sense of these experiences, to understand and to critique a system based on ableist assumptions and deficit models. It allowed me to challenge disabling practices as I repeatedly advocated for the removal of the barriers to his learning and social inclusion. Disability studies in education enabled me to see, and to show others, that the moments of disruptive potential that disability so often brings to
educational practices and spaces should be welcomed and valued. Finally, disabil-ity studies in education have the power to explode the category of ‘a special need’ and to (re)claim the category of child.

Tanya Titchkosky

How education is conceived of and practiced, influences how disability is understood and treated; it influences too the manner in which disabled people as well as the idea of disability are included in education. Into the heart of these conceptions and practices, treatments and ideas, the work of disability studies in education (DSE) enters. There are innumerable educational practices that expect the non-presence of disability, forcing disabled people out or sending us or our loved ones off into a kind of accommodation purgatory. At the same time, educational practices include the idea of disability through their on-going proclamations that they will find, diagnose, and dissolve disability through management, treatment or cure. DSE provides the opportunity to pause and grapple with the meanings being made of disability and of people, rather than joining in, seeking to improve the remedial practices of education that generate these meanings in the first place.

Disability’s meaning, how we experience it, how we feel, think and live disability always has something to do with others and this, of course, includes education. Rather than trying to make disabled people fit into a restricted version of humanity, DSE affirms a wider sense of humanity; rather than producing diagnostic and therapeutic knowledge about disability, DSE demonstrates the limits of educational versions of disability while offering a version of humanity that welcomes disability as essential and life-affirming. Working and living at the crossroads of creativity and constraint, education in all its multitudinous forms, has much to do with how we will imagine and live with disability.

For good or for bad, education is a constitutive force in our lives and disability studies allows us to consider how this force generates various meanings of disability. What ideas of disability does education generate? How do these ideas playout in the education of, and with, disabled people? These are some the questions that disability studies in education raises. Exploring such questions in this DSE journal is not only important but exciting for nurturing more life affirming versions of being together.