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Blind and Partially Sighted Children in Britain: The RNIB Survey

ERROL WALKER, MICHAEL TOBIN & AUBREY MCKENNEL 1992

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As someone with a congenital visual impairment and experience of 'special' schools for 'blind and partially sighted children' I found this study particularly annoying. In short, it is a report about disabled children and disabled young adults written by non-disabled people for other non-disabled people working in education, the health and social support services, and the voluntary sector; needless to say the results are predictable, to say the least.

Sponsored by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), it is the first national survey of partially sighted children in the UK. A similar study, *Blind and Partially Sighted Adults in Britain: The RNIB Survey* was published in 1991. The three researchers responsible for this particular report are Errol Walker, Michael Tobin and Aubrey Mckennell. Walker and Tobin have a long history in quantitative research; besides the RNIB both have worked for the Government, the former, in the Office of Populations, Censuses and Surveys (OPCS), and the latter, on the Government's Social Survey. Tobin is 'Reader in Special Education, and Director of the Research Centre for the Education of the Visually **Handicapped** at the University of Birmingham'—specialising in research into the 'handicapping' effects of severe visual impairment. As far as I know, not one of them has personal experience of visual impairment or, indeed, of disability.

Like its predecessor, the study is based firmly in the traditions of the medical model of disability. There are no references whatsoever to the social model or the developments of the last twelve years, in particular, the emergence of the disabled peoples' movement and its critique of disability research (see Hunt, 1981; Finkelstein 1985; Oliver, 1987, 1992). Moreover, not one of the nineteen references cited in the document was written by a disabled person.

Unsurprisingly, the methods employed are those of the OPCS disability surveys of the 1980s (Martin *et al.*, 1988) consequently similar criticisms apply. The report gives priority to medical rather than social concerns. For example, it is divided into five parts, two of which, Parts C and D, are devoted to impairments and function and entitled 'Aspects of Disability' and 'Daily Living and Mobility' respectively. Part A is the summary, Part B, the study's background, and Parts E and F are about schooling and leisure.

As with the OPCS surveys, the terminology used is that of the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicap.

Impairment ‘concerns the functional loss, e.g. sight, due to impairment; disability, the restriction or inability to perform an activity due to the impairment; and handicap the social consequences of the functional loss’ (p. 39). Moreover, although the authors state clearly that these terms have clear meanings and that there is a need for consistency, they proceed to use them indiscriminately throughout. For example, physical impairments are repeatedly referred to as either ‘physical disabilities’ or ‘physical handicaps’. The document also contains disablist language, displaying the views of the authors rather than those of people with impairments. Examples include: ‘eyesight problems’ (p. 3), ‘poor vision’ (p. 11) and ‘mental handicaps’ (p. 20).

Further, as with the OPCS surveys, quantitative methodologies are prioritised over meaningful qualitative analysis. Findings are based on one-shot interviews with 285 parents of visually impaired children, 56 of whom had other impairments too, aged 3–19 years, taken from the records of a representative sample of 33 local authorities within the UK. Notably, the authors chose not to interview the children. Apart from a letter asking prospective respondents to participate in the research, which simply outlined RNIB’s desire to find out more about the ‘views of and needs of parents with children who have a visual impairment’ (p. 269), interviewees were given no prior information about the issues to be discussed. Moreover, there was no mechanism built into the research for respondent validation. Consequently, the findings contained in over 190 tables must be treated with the utmost caution.

Additionally, the majority of questions are person-centred and focus squarely upon impairment as the primary cause of perceived problems. For instance, ‘Is the difficulty [not being able to do the daily living task] mainly because of his/her eyesight, or something else?’ (p. 88). It is notable that in response to this question only 20% of the sample viewed ‘sight’ as the main reason for their child’s difficulties and 50% reported ‘other’ reasons, but we are not told what ‘other’ actually referred to or, most importantly, how the question was interpreted by interviewees.

Moreover, the importance of professional experts in disability management rather than disabled people themselves is emphasized throughout the report, as is the role of special schools for the education of disabled children. With regard to parents’ difficulties gaining access to medical information from professionals, for example, the authors suggest the need for another professional—‘an advocate or adviser, drawn from the specialist teacher or medical services’ (p. 9).

In terms of education, the authors claim that the most important ‘resource’ is the teacher with ‘specialist qualifications’ and subsequently report that 73% of children in special schools saw such a specialist every day, while ‘only 10% of those in ordinary schools had such a high frequency of contact’ (p. 19).

While it may be said that this survey yields a wealth of data ripe for reinterpretation, for me its main strength lies in the fact that it provides us with yet another example of how *not* to do disability research. Furthermore, although I have argued previously (Barnes, 1992, p. 122) that it is not necessary for researchers to have an impairment to do disability related research, if confronted with many more studies like this one I will be forced to change my mind.

