

'Cabbage Syndrome'

The social construction
of dependence



Colin Barnes

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Preface

This is an empirical study which describes and evaluates the role of day centres with regard to young people with physical impairments aged between 16 and 30, describes and evaluates the interactions between users and staff within the day centre environment, outlines and assesses the level of user participation in the centres with reference to activities, the decision-making process and control, and suggests a set of policy recommendations which are applicable to both the service studied and day services generally for this user group.

Four ideal types of day centre for the younger physically impaired are identified. All are criticized on the basis that they are inherently segregative, emphasize difference and perpetuate stigma. Within this context day centres are perceived as the 'dumping ground' for those people who are excluded, because of physical impairment, from the normal social and economic life of society. Empirical evidence to support this view is provided firstly by the overtly negative features of the general organization and admission policies of the system studied, secondly by the degree of social and economic disadvantage experienced by the users interviewed prior to day centre use, and thirdly by the manner in which they were similarly labelled and 'directed' toward the centres. I argue that day centre use reinforces disadvantage because, although helper/helped relations within the system are viewed positively by both users and staff, user participation and control of services is low; and because, while the system provides a range of facilities which give many users a level of self-determination unavailable in the community at large, its capacity to extend those experiences beyond the day centre boundary is limited to only a few. Consequently attendance for the majority will be long-term.

I list a number of recommendations, including the formulation of a national policy clarifying the role of day services for this user group, which might help to alleviate this problem. I conclude that present policies which successfully disable young people with impairments are no longer simply socially unacceptable. They are also economically inept.

Colin Barnes
July 1989

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