CREATIVE SUBJECTS? CRITICALLY DOCUMENTING ART EDUCATION AND DISABILITY

Claire Penketh
Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

The arts are recognized both for their capacity to create opportunities for inclusion and exclusion. Art education can operate as a site that can enable and disable, where outmoded practices exist alongside opportunities that extend the possibilities for learning and engagement with art education as a critical social process. These tensions offer a starting point for this exploration of art education and disability. This particular study focused on papers published in the International Journal of Art and Design Education (IJADE) over the last 30 years and offers a critical document of the range of attitudes and beliefs about disability evident in published work on art education.

Art education, as a cultural practice, is well placed for deepening our understanding of disability. In the Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies, David Bolt asks if the study of culture can deepen our understanding of disability and whether a study of disability can therefore deepen our understanding of culture. I have applied these questions to art education asking whether a study of art education can deepen our understanding of disability and the extent to which the study of disability deepen our understanding of art education.

IJADE is an international peer reviewed journal with a focus on art and design education. A study of published papers in this journal offers insight into discourses relating to the development of research in art and design education. The theoretical framework, influenced by the Foucauldian tracing of 'systems of thought' and processes of 'normalisation, has enabled an examination of the ways in which knowledge about disability has been conveyed via explorations of art education and the ways in which knowledge about art education has been conveyed via representations of disability.

This study is concerned with the ways in which a reading of published work can inform a change in attitudes and practice. Language use in early papers would now be deemed unacceptable and it is perhaps heartening to reflect on the changes in the representation of disability in this respect. However, we must question more work in IJADE that represents disabled people as abnormal, deficient and in particular need of the 'special' gifts that an art education can bestow. Identifying the needs of the disabled learner as 'special' is only one (fundamentally flawed) way of conceptualising learning in and through the arts, and that this is problematic for learner and teacher.