

Internalized Oppression

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"Internalized oppression is not the cause of our mistreatment, it is the result of our mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external oppression that forms the social climate in which we exist.

Once oppression has been internalized, little force is needed to keep us submissive. We harbour inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives"

Some people with disabilities suffer from the condition itself, whilst others don't. All of us, however, suffer from internalized oppression.

When the Save the Children Fund did research into the attitudes of black and white children they were shocked to find that by the age of three, black children were already wanting to be white, and that both groups of children valued their white friends more than their black friends. This is the phenomenon of "internalized oppression" - seeing that one group of people are valued more highly than another, and wanting to become like them. This happens every bit as much for disabled children and children with learning difficulties as for black children or working class children.

For disabled children the message that there is



something wrong with us can start from birth. Imagine yourself to be a baby. You have just struggled out into the world fully expecting a warm welcome, but instead you get "Oh God! How could this happen to me? Aaargh!" How do you think this would make you feel about yourself? Good? No, of course not. The medical model of disability leads from the point of diagnosis to lifetime of feeling that we are a disappointment and a worry to everyone. It seems perfectly logical to conclude that having a disability is a bad thing because it upsets everyone, and eliminating or lessening the disability is a worthwhile obsession because without it, you as a person will be joy to those you love most, instead of misery. Other children play, but you do "therapy". Other children play, but you do "therapy". Other children develop, but you are "trained". Almost every activity of daily living can take on the dimension of trying to make you less like yourself and more like the able-bodied. The world is often quite happy to reinforce this rather than being objective.

The Joy I Lost For Ever

I really wish I were healthy and had my left hand. Nobody knows how much I'd like my life to be better, like those who are strong and healthy. Everybody enjoys living happily, but not me. My life is different. People sometimes do me harm by laughing at me. It is very painful for me and I'd like to avoid moments like this at any cost. When it is warm I'd like to put on a blouse with short sleeves, but I can't. I am simply ashamed. I hate anybody staring at me and seeing the lack of my left arm. I am very sorry then, the older I am the more painful it is to me.

Elzbieta Sobiech

When a person feels bad about themselves, and wishes to be like someone else, it is very common to also feel bad about the group one belongs to, and to try to merge into the group which is perceived as superior in the hope that the difference will become invisible. This is the other phenomena of internalize oppression, and especially in the world of disability, has led to us dividing and dividing into smaller and smaller groups, competing with and denying each other, leading many of us to become isolated disabled people living with able-bodied people on able-bodied terms - millions of powerless individuals doing our best to "make it" on our own.

This needs contradiction from outside, not the reinforcement it usually gets. There is a particular danger in attempting to integrate individuals or very small groups of disabled children into a large established, non-disabled community of children and staff, in that there may be no attempt to foster positive and collective identity as young disabled people within an "integrated" setting, as people see this as a reactionary step. In "Good Practices in the Classroom" we make some suggestions as to how this may be attempted, although there is at present very little "good practice" to follow in this area.

