Introduction

People with learning difficulties in the United Kingdom will generally have a similar life expectancy to people without learning difficulties (except for those with complicated impairments), but research indicates that the health needs, and especially the sexual needs, of people with learning difficulties have largely been unmet (Meehan, Moore and Barr, 1995; Mencap, 1991). Since the advent of Community Care policies in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, fewer people with learning difficulties live in institutions and it is estimated that about 60 per cent of people with learning difficulties live in the community now. However, Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells and Davies state that ‘with the growing numbers of disabled people living independent lives in the community, more complex issues of relationships, sexual practice, domestic violence and parenting have been on the agenda.’ (1996: 188).

This is the starting point for this chapter, which addresses the sexual identities of people with learning difficulties. It will explore the attitudes and practices of the past and some of the issues around vulnerability, risk and rights of the present. The final section will reflect on the wider political and conceptual aspects of social exclusion and sexual citizenship that could affect people with learning difficulties in the future. It will draw on examples from a recent research project that looked at the lived experiences and viewpoints of young people with learning difficulties around sex and relationships (CHANGE, 2009). The research project, ‘Talking about sex and relationships: The views of young people with learning difficulties’ (hereafter referred to as the ‘Sex and Relationships project’) was based at the Centre for Disability Studies at Leeds University, and worked in collaboration with CHANGE, a national organization that fights for the rights of people with learning difficulties. The research was carried out using drama sessions with young people, age 16–25, a national sex education
survey of special schools, interviews with parents and focus groups with teachers and governors. The examples will be used specifically to illustrate issues around non-sexual identity, vulnerability, attitudes, discrimination and equal rights.

Terminology in disability research is historically fraught. The British Institute of Learning Disability defines someone with a ‘learning disability’ as a person who will have difficulties understanding, learning and remembering new things, and in generalizing any learning to new situations. Because of these difficulties with learning, ‘the person may have difficulties with a number of social tasks, for example communication, self-care, awareness of health and safety…[and]…these impairments are present from childhood’ (Northfield, 2004: 2). The terms ‘learning disability’ and ‘learning difficulty’ can be used synonymously. However, within disability politics, it is recognized that people from the international advocacy organization ‘People First’ prefer the term ‘learning difficulty’. Subsequently, the term ‘learning difficulty’ will be used throughout this chapter.

Within disability studies, terminology around sexuality is equally contentious. Disability theorists point out that sexuality is not just about undertaking a sexual act. It can be seen as an integral part of every human including contact, warmth, tenderness or love. Webb (1987) states that sexuality can reflect our individuality and our identity. She also sees it as communication and love between two people. Downs and Craft (1996) support Webb by suggesting that sexuality can include the following: relationships with others and social opportunities; keeping and feeling safe and healthy; physical/sexual development and sexual activity; feelings and emotions; appearance/self presentation; self-image/sexual identity and self esteem; decision making and taking control of aspects of one’s life (Downs and Craft, 1996). The sexuality of people with learning difficulties, therefore, is not just about sexual acts, it incorporates a wider picture, including warmth, love and connectedness with other human beings. It is within these definitions, that I now turn to explore the sexual identities of people with learning difficulties, drawing on their experiences in the past and the present, and considering the possibilities for their future.

Reflecting on the past: denial, restriction and ignorance

To address the sexual identities of people with learning difficulties, it is important to provide a historical context. The experience of people with learning difficulties within a historical ‘past’ can pave the way for present and future understandings and practices. In the Middle Ages and before, there were many myths about people with learning difficulties. They could be referred to as ‘changelings’ or ‘cretins’ and could be viewed as ‘sub-human’ or as a separate ‘sub-species’ (HMSO, 1908; Ryan and Thomas, 1987). Other myths centred around the view that people with learning difficulties