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## **Increasing Inclusion: Did Anyone Mention Learning?**

As the pace of including a wider range of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools increases so does the need for an honest debate about which system or systems offer the best quality of learning. This debate must be informed by an understanding of how pupils learn.

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### **WHOSE INCLUSION IS IT ANYWAY?**

Inclusion is a problematic concept. As a process, inclusion raises many questions, which as yet seem to remain largely unanswered. Is it intended to be a process that empowers all learners to take up their civil rights so that they can participate within a unified, yet still profoundly diverse, learning community? Is it a process that aims to increase global democracy and establish new cultural and political goals? Does the inclusive process require the constant evaluation of different models to assess which ones are the most beneficial for learners? Or is the intention to create one inclusive 'mainstream' system for all? If so, does this mean that special schools further oppress those who are already overwhelmed by oppression and as a consequence should be closed down? Fundamentally, who is inclusion for and why?

### **THE GLADIATORS VERSUS THE GLACIATORS**

Increasing inclusion involves a paradigm shift. The model of integration - where learners from different communities meet together socially, locationally, or functionally - has now changed to an inclusive model - where difference is welcomed within one diverse learning community. This is not a new idea, early child welfare pioneers were in favour of non-categorised schools as early as the



start of the 1900's (Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998). Since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) espoused the development of schools with an inclusive orientation the debate regarding inclusion has taken on a global significance. However, this debate can promote an unhealthy polarity of thinking. At one extreme we find the 'gladiators' - fighting for inclusion for all, at the fastest pace possible, unswerving in their aim to ensure that all learners in special education take up their right to learn alongside their mainstream peers. The perception is that they aim to increase the headcount of inclusion in order to forward the cause of social justice. At the other extreme are the 'glaciators'. They appear to want to hijack the inclusion bandwagon by proposing a freezing of the inclusive trend, with its romantic and dogmatic ideology, in order to develop a system that ultimately becomes more segregated. Such systems are characterised by the myth that parents and pupils can exercise choice.

### **ONCE MORE THE VICTIMS**

Caught in the middle of this ideological battle are some of the most vulnerable pupils, their teachers, families and advocates. They are the real victims of polarised thinking. Pupils with learning difficulties can become casualties of the systemic abuse of power, as those who wield power over them make decisions about their inclusion and exclusion. In England, for example, pupils with special educational needs (SEN) are disproportionately represented in formal exclusion statistics (DfEE, 1998). Just as inclusion is a problematic concept, so is school. Schools can not operate within a vacuum in which all interactions are value-free and unaffected by the political climate. We also have to recognise that the choices teachers make in relation to whether they work in a special or mainstream school can have a powerful affect upon their willingness to teach pupils with special needs.

### **RHETORIC AND REALITY**

Some teachers already express a "widespread" concern about the increasing numbers of pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream classrooms (Croll and Moses, 2000). This supports the view expressed by Guiney (2000) that teachers can develop their own personal frameworks of reference in relation to 'who they do' and 'who they don't do'. For example, I may 'do' pupils with physical disability as my contribution towards inclusion, but I do not 'do' pupils who present challenging behaviour, who affect the learning of others and make my life more stressful. Such attitudes can provide barriers to inclusion and promote ill-informed and generalised assumptions



about disability and learning difficulty. I am not presenting these views as an argument against inclusion or as a criticism of certain teachers - far from it. I am highlighting the difference between rhetoric and reality. No matter how much commitment we have to the cause of inclusion, we can not ignore the reality of what is taking place in schools. It can not be assumed that placement in a mainstream school will result in higher quality learning for everybody (Hornby, 1999). Those who put inclusive ideology into practice require support and training to enable them to offer the best opportunities for pupils. This will help to develop inclusive systems and promote a philosophy that moves beyond tolerance and into acceptance.

### **INCLUSION: MORE THAN HEADCOUNT**

Of course, there are smooth transitory experiences within the move towards increased inclusion and those involved should receive recognition for their successes. However, there are also situations that provide high levels of tension either when inclusive placement seems to be breaking down or when inclusive placement still does not apply to certain groups of learners at all. Whilst the planning of inclusion must consider organisational responses, funding, class size, resources and other clearly important issues, we are in danger of losing sight of the critical issue. Namely that pupils attend school, be it special, mainstream, or a combination of both, so that they can *learn*. It would be refreshing to hear more people positioning learning - where and how an individual will learn to their potential - as a central component of the inclusion debate. By this I do not only mean the important analysis and development of new curricular frameworks, framework curricula (NCCA, 1999) or conceptual models but combining our understanding of the curriculum with an understanding of how learners learn. This enables us to reflect upon pedagogy. We know that certain approaches (such as the use of visual sequencing for pupils with Downs Syndrome) may typically be more helpful to certain groups and individuals. Such knowledge is relevant to the success of inclusive placements because learner difference requires teaching difference. An expansive understanding of the nature and definition of disability (DfEE, 1999) will also help to support the process. Inclusive placement should not be judged on the crudity of headcount, it should be judged on its ability to provide inclusive learning.

### **ANOTHER PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT**

As the critical differences between learners increase, the critical mass of the curriculum expands (O'Brien, 1998a). Here we have another problematic concept



- curriculum. The curriculum is a values-vehicle and is influenced by and influences sociocultural factors. How the curriculum is conceived in an inclusive environment will influence the quality of inclusive learning.

The starting point for inclusive learning begins when teachers reflect upon how they teach. What are they doing when they execute routines and make decisions to create the most enabling and responsive learning environment? How does their concept of 'curriculum' affect their ability to teach an increasingly wider range of pupils? The inside of a teacher's head is the key resource for inclusion. Inclusive opportunities are immediately restricted if the curriculum is seen to be the subject components of the timetable. This only reinforces a lack of fluidity in practice. The curriculum comprises all intended and unintended learning experiences that take place in and through the school. It exists within a social, political, moral, economic and political context. It enables all learners to manipulate information and knowledge, to understand their emotional needs, to find problems as well as to solve them, and to develop their own sense of consciousness. It contributes to how a learner constructs a notion of self.

My contention is that it represents much more than subject-specific areas and outcomes. An inclusive curriculum should place an emphasis on what it means to be human. Market-driven ideologies, where pupils become 'clients' and attainment rather than achievement is the most valid 'performance-indicator' of pupil and school success, work against the development of inclusive systems. There are fundamental moral and ethical issues to be confronted when learners with SEN become the damaged goods on the education market stall.

## **INCLUSIVE LEARNING**

Inclusive learning should recognise and connect with learners as unique individuals and as members of groups (O'Brien, 1998b). It should demonstrate to them that they can learn, and support them in understanding how they learn. Constant interaction with a curriculum that does not do this will result in pupils actively disengaging from what is on offer. Inclusive learning should also be interactive, mediated for you and on your behalf by those who know what you do not know. They can be your peers - including peers who experience learning difficulties - as well as the adults that work with you. Inclusive learning is grounded in who you are as a person, your sense of worth and the contribution that you can make to the community now and in the future. It is also grounded in how you learn.



## NO LONGER 'SPECIAL'

We have to answer, with honesty and integrity, the questions about where and how a pupil learns best. Is it realistic, or morally right, to expect all pupils to be able to learn in mainstream schools when they may receive a higher quality education in an inclusive system which provides interdependent links between mainstream and special schools? Some pupils may learn best in a negotiated programme involving links between special and mainstream settings. This could combat the curricular and social fragmentation and isolation that can be an outcome of receiving full time education in a special school. I must emphasise that I am in favour of all learners taking up their right to learn together but I am expressing concerns about situations where *being there* appears to have taken preference over *learning there*.

Planned programmes for inclusive *learning* are vital. When mutual learning programmes take place there can also be emotional benefits for all concerned (Shevlin and O'Moore, 2000). To facilitate the development of inclusive systems we need a working model of how children learn which enables us to respond to all pupils wherever they are taught and whatever their learning needs. Inclusive systems seem to me to be the way forward in increasing effective inclusion. In proposing the development of such systems the term 'special' can be restricting, discriminatory, and often patronising.

The focus of an inclusive system has to be on uniqueness and individuality. An obsession with 'specialness' creates inclusion confusion which results in questions about whether everyone is special, or if some people are more special than others.

## AN OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK

A fundamental premise for providing teaching that is matched to learning is a knowledge and understanding of how and why pupils learn. As learning is a purposive and interactive process, every pupil should be encouraged to understand her or his own learning styles and strategies. Research evidence illustrates that pupils who experience SEN can benefit from the intellectual challenge offered by planned curriculum opportunities to reflect on how they think, interact and learn (Watson, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) offers an optimistic outlook on the human capability to learn. He argued that the crucial index of a child's development is not what they can do now - their *actual* level, but what they will be able to do in the future - their *potential* level. He describes the difference between a learner's actual and potential level as the 'Zone of Proximal Development'.



My view of the reality of daily practice is that each teacher carries a notional idea, correct or incorrect, of the actual level of each pupil they teach, in relation to what is being taught. They also carry a notional idea of where the pupil can get to over time - their potential level. Added to this, they will have conceptualised a plan of the best co-participatory interactions that are necessary in order to get the pupil to where they want them to be. This thinking will inform a differentiation plan that can ensure responsive teaching.

## **A MODEL OF LEARNING PROCESSES**

It appears rational to assume that in order to be an effective teacher you need to possess a theoretical model of how learning takes place. Norman (1978) provides a progressive, four- stage, model.

- 1. Accretion**
- 2. Restructuring and Tuning-In**
- 3. Automisation**
- 4. De-Automisation**

*Cognitive stages in learning.*

The learning tasks offered by the teacher can be targeted to the four cognitive stages. This ensures that learners can move from stage to stage in order to check and re-check that what they have learned works for them.

### **ACCRETION**

At the beginning of any new task there is a high level of accretion. This is where the learner, through sensory channels, continuously receives and structures information that is *new* in order to process and make meaning from it. There are specific factors to consider at this stage for learners who have sensory impairments. If overall learning intentions (and the pace and modes of accretion) are not made clear to the learner, it is at this point that she or he may misunderstand the goals and demands that the teacher has intended. When we learn something new we are confronted by uncertainty which may quickly lead to anxiety. Therefore at this stage there is a need for initial input then reduced support from the teacher. Collaborative learning, with anyone else who can perform the role of teacher, will also help. The speed at which different pupils



move through the stage of accretion is relative to learning need, teaching methodology and resources.

### **RESTRUCTURING AND TUNING IN**

When learning becomes less externally mediated the level of accretion is reduced and the learner can carry out a task with less assistance from others. The pupil begins to restructure information so that they can ultimately participate in the task as an independent learner. Pupils do this by experimenting with the meaning that they have constructed from the information or input that they have been given - they 'tune-in' to it. It is at this point that there is a moment of realisation where the pupil understands that they have learned what they set out to learn. They may demonstrate physical or verbal signs of pleasure at their achievement.

The process of tuning-in then overtakes that of restructuring. Tuning-in offers the opportunity for learners to try out what they have learned to see if it works for them. The learner begins to act upon their learning and to take more risks. Tasks that involve discovery, problem solving and application will target this stage of the learning process. Interactive, interpersonal and interdependent group activities such as games, role-play and opportunities to express beliefs and opinions will also enable teaching to match learning.

### **AUTOMISATION**

After the processes of accretion, restructuring and tuning-in have been assimilated, the learner can fully complete a task. They have 'got it'. The earlier stages of the learning process do not have to be supported, mediated or regulated by the teacher anymore.

However, pupils may need learning support of a different kind that relates to the totality of their learning needs. Pupils with a visual impairment or those with emotional difficulties, for example, may require continued support. It is important to emphasise that repeating the task again - doing more of the same - might provide short-term practice but it is fatally flawed as a long-term strategy for providing new learning. There is a big difference between being busy, looking busy, and learning something new! Increased demand, application, and enrichment is an equality of opportunity issue - it should not be seen as belonging mainly within the domain of the 'able' or 'gifted' child - all pupils should receive this in order to improve the quality of their learning at this stage.



## **DE-AUTOMISATION**

Over time a learner may forget what was learned and learning no longer becomes automatic for them. Recalling learning that appears to have gone missing can be a problem for all learners. In some cases it is a particular issue for those pupils who experience SEN. For some learners, the chance to recall and practise old learning will return them to a position where they can apply skills and manipulate knowledge as they had been able to do previously. For others the teacher will have to discover at which stage of the four-stage process the learning difficulty is occurring. This might result in returning to opportunities for accretion by approaching the task as if it was completely new learning again. In other situations opportunities for restructuring may be more relevant. Unfortunately, generalised assumptions about special needs can lead to some pupils being bombarded with repetitive and sometimes demeaning input, when it is time and space to restructure and tune-in to the learning that they have previously acquired that is needed.

## **BEYOND COGNITION**

The most serious limitation of the model is that it does not include the affective factors that influence our ability to learn. Learning is emotionally as well as cognitively demanding for the pupil and the teacher. To increase the success of inclusion we need to move beyond cognition and consider social, pedagogical and emotional factors that influence learning (O'Brien, 2000). We need to be analytical about the influence that factors such as status, culture, gender, class, past experience, and expectations have upon how we learn. We must also challenge the transmission of stereotypical assumptions about pupils who experience SEN; for example, that they all suffer from terminal low self-esteem. I recall a pupil that I taught recently. His self-esteem in one context - reading - was poor, but in another context - burglary - it was very high. His case serves to remind me that we should not assume that self-esteem is one singular and solid concept that constantly remains the same, especially throughout the undulating topography of the curriculum.

## **ASK YOURSELF**

The inclusion debate rightly concerns itself with the issues of civil, moral and claim rights. In the educational arena, we should ensure that we also add the right to learn to your potential to this agenda. When you next find yourself in a professional context where inclusion has been the topic for debate, **ask yourself -**



**did anyone mention learning?** Hopefully, there will be at least one positive response if you include yourself in the answer. In relation to others, perhaps your data will be richer than mine has been on certain occasions.

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