

## **The Challenge of Inclusiveness: Towards a More Generous System of Education**

The political significance of the move to the language of inclusion and exclusion (as distinct from integration and segregation) is that it shifts the focus from the disabilities of the child to the inability or the unwillingness of the 'ordinary' system to accommodate special needs. It challenges the assumption that the purposes and practices of ordinary schools are so important that they cannot be modified or changed in any significant way.

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### **FROM 'SPECIAL' SEGREGATION TO INCLUSIVE SOCIAL ORDER**

One of the ideas emerging in the debate about special/mainstream integration has been that of a wholly inclusive form of educational practice in which the distinction between 'special' and 'mainstream' would disappear. In its most radical form, not only segregated special schooling, but the very designation of a category of children as 'special', is brought into question. It is argued that to combat the marginalising effects of separateness and labelling, and to assert the political and educational rights of those designated as having special needs, requires a fundamental reappraisal - deeper and more far reaching than anything currently being officially attempted - of our social and educational institutions, their ethos and structures. Thus Oliver advocates a shift from the language of integration and segregation to that of inclusion and exclusion, and a wholesale deconstruction and reconstruction of the curriculum and of school and teacher responses (Oliver, 1995).

Perhaps many readers will have found Oliver's rhetoric altogether too sweeping, but the idea of inclusive education is one which anyone committed to a genuinely inclusive social order, in which everyone has an equal right to flourish, has to take very seriously. (For an argument in support of this, based on the respect for persons principle, see Gaden, 1993.) It is not, however, a transparently clear idea,



and to take it seriously requires that we examine what it means - that is, what the commitment amounts to in terms of ideological and institutional moves.

### **INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION - A QUESTION OF RIGHTS**

What, then, is the point of thinking in terms of inclusion/exclusion rather than integration/segregation? There are two main aspects to this. First, exclusion entails some systematic denial of goods or rights: those included possess some good or privilege denied to others by the process of exclusion, so that in this respect there is a difference of status. By contrast, segregation is consistent with equality of status between the separated parties (as for instance in the old provision of separate playgrounds for boys and girls), even though it has often been used as a way of enforcing inequalities (as in racial apartheid).

Second, segregation/integration presupposes the existence of groups which are identifiable independently of the process itself. Exclusion, by contrast, may be an arbitrary matter, the distinction between those included and those excluded being created in an ad hoc manner or merely to serve the current purposes or preferences of those with power to control the process.

### **CLASSIFICATION TO SERVE THE SYSTEM NOT THE CHILD**

To adopt the language of inclusion and exclusion in the present case, therefore, is to suggest that the classification of certain children as 'special' may involve a denial or diminution of rights, and adversely affect their status relative to others, even under conditions which can be described as integrated. One may think here of the way in which the status difference, no longer marked by segregated schooling, may nevertheless simply reappear at another level - in the separateness of special units, or in the subjection of these children and their families to complex and anxiety-producing systems of assessment and 'statementing'. But more than this, it is to suggest that there is an arbitrariness in the classification itself: that the category is created and developed in accordance with, and principally to serve, the interests and purposes of others.

No one denies that there exist large and educationally significant differences, and that in some cases it is possible and reasonable to recognise relatively clear groupings: of those with profound visual or auditory impairment, severe difficulties with language, or serious forms of mental disorder (such as autism). However, the category of special children has been by no means confined to these. Indeed, it has changed dramatically over the years: formerly people with



significant motor disabilities were included as a matter of course, nowadays very often they are not; in recent times 'behavioural problems' have increasingly warranted 'special' treatment; and the post-Warnock era has been characterised by a huge increase in the number of children classified in this way, via the extended concept of special educational need. (Warnock stipulated that up to 20% may at sometime come within the SEN category.) Such observations, filled out with sociological detail, give support to the contention that the 'special' category is manufactured largely to serve the interests of the 'ordinary' system. (For an early but still relevant account along these lines, see Tomlinson, 1982.)

### **SERC REPORT: A RELUCTANCE TO CHALLENGE THE SYSTEM**

Turning to official documentation, in the SERC Report we find that, apart from those for whom ordinary education "is not sufficiently challenging" (presumably the exceptionally gifted), the SEN category is taken to include:

all those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, (Department of Education, 1993 p.18).

Here the source of the difficulties is clearly being defined in terms of the disabilities and/or circumstances of the children. The political significance of the move to the language of inclusion and exclusion is that it shifts the focus from the (real or alleged) disabilities or deficiencies of the child to the inability or unwillingness of the 'ordinary' system to accommodate her. It challenges the assumption that either the existing purposes and practices of ordinary schools are so important and well-grounded that they cannot be modified, or that they cannot be pursued in any other way (i.e. without creating a separate, publicly marked 'special' group). For if there is to be full inclusiveness, then there has to be fundamental change in mainstream or ordinary education. In fact, this concept itself has to be abandoned: the 'ordinary' has to go. If you do not want outsiders, then you cannot have insiders either.

### **INCLUSIVENESS: FOCUSING ON NEEDS, GOALS AND VALUES**

What does inclusiveness demand with regard to changes in educational thought? This is best approached by focusing initially on the concept of educational need, and especially upon the relationship between needs, goals and values. Discussion about needs always involves assumptions about goals and values: if we disagree about goals and values, we shall disagree about needs (Wilson, 1971). To say that



someone has 'special needs' will be to say one or more of the following:

- (a) That the means usually employed to meet accepted goals or standards cannot be used or are inappropriate in this case, so that alternative (special) ones have to be employed.
- (b) That different goals or standards apply in this case, so that what is required in practice will be different.
- (c) That different ideological commitments, regarding ideas of progress, human development or flourishing, are relevant in this case - this will affect both the goals or aims selected and the manner in which they are pursued.

For example, someone with serious visual or auditory impairment may need special means to be adopted in the pursuit of conventional goals; someone with severe mental disability may need to pursue different goals in order to flourish; while someone of a different cultural or ideological background may understand 'flourishing' in a different way and thus require that the aims and the practices involved in pursuing them be differently conceived.

#### **ARE EDUCATIONAL GOALS THE SAME FOR ALL ?**

Now it has been commonplace in statements of educational policy to follow Warnock in asserting that educational aims or goals for all pupils are essentially the same, although different means may be required for certain pupils, and standards of achievement will vary. This line of thought, however plausible it might seem, has certain unhelpful consequences. First, the conflation of goals and values means that they cannot be independently questioned. It is assumed that the adoption of common values in education (social responsibility, personal growth, industriousness, creativity, etc. - enterprise, if you like) entails the pursuit of common aims or goals. Second, the assertion that the goals are the same for everyone discourages any serious questioning of mainstream goals - the assertion merely records that the aims for children with disabilities or other difficulties do not differ from these. And third, the restriction of thought to a means-ends framework, together with the assumption of common goals, ensures that the only questions which are allowed to arise are those concerning means. We therefore find ourselves preoccupied with procedures for assessing the shortcomings of certain pupils and strategies for dealing with these - a preoccupation reflected in the quasi-medical language of 'diagnosis', 'remediation' and 'clinical teaching', which pervades the special education field at present.



## **A SHIFT FROM ENDS AND MEANS TO GOALS AND VALUES**

It should now be clearer what kind of change in thinking is fundamental to the movement towards an 'inclusive' view of education in which the 'special' category is eliminated: the focus has to shift from means to goals and values. We may be able to retain our central educational values - insofar as these come into question, they do so as a result of ethnic, cultural and ideological diversity rather than differences in talent or ability. However, we would have to recognise that these values can be evinced in many patterns of development and in the pursuit of many different goals, all of which are to be acknowledged as educationally worthwhile. The idea that the concerns of educators are restricted to a particular, limited set of goals which are basically the same for everybody, is not sustainable in a community which values the flourishing of all; because there is no reason to expect that everyone can flourish in just these ways, and no reason (other than administrative convenience) for requiring them to do so, and stating that they have 'special needs' if they do not.

## **COLLABORATIVE WAYS TO AN INDIVIDUALISED CURRICULUM**

What sorts of institutional moves are implied by the recognition of a wide and diverse range of educational goals, and the acceptance of large differences between people in the directions they take? The first and most obvious consequence is that the idea of any substantial 'common curriculum' is undermined, since the question of what aims to pursue is a question which is now seen to arise in all cases, and not merely for those with marked disabilities or other difficulties. Every educational activity becomes essentially an option - this goes even for those connected with 'basic' skills such as literacy - in the sense that there will be some who do not take it up. A fully inclusive system requires a strongly individualised curriculum. Decisions about what options are to be pursued would have to be made at certain points in each child's educational career, without any presupposition that a certain standard set of activities is appropriate for all, or even most. Now clearly no school could be expected to cater by itself for all the recognised options, so the second main consequence of inclusive education is that some movement of pupils and of teachers between schools becomes inevitable. There is no need to prescribe a panacea in which every school is able to teach everything to everybody; rather a local area, embracing a number of schools, should be able to achieve quite comprehensive provision in terms of both curricular offerings and specialised facilities. Since such a system would require a very great deal of imaginative planning at local level, a further inevitable consequence is a loss in the autonomy currently



enjoyed by individual schools - a giving up of proprietorial attitudes to pupils and teachers, and perhaps also of claims to distinctive ethos.

None of this, of course, looks a likely prospect at a time when curricula are highly centralised, schools are commonly seen as competing with one another, and their distinctiveness is being stoutly defended by their managers. Perhaps the above will be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea of inclusive education. If so, it will be because we cannot envisage the possibility of the idea of the common curriculum and the independence of schools being given up.

### **A MORE GENEROUS AND FLEXIBLE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION**

I have been trying to show what is implicit in a commitment to inclusive education, and to identify the major obstacles to its realisation. These obstacles are partly conceptual because they relate to how we articulate our understanding of education in terms of needs, goals and values. They are partly institutional because those understandings are reflected in major structural features of our present system. Investment in these features runs very deep, securing the perceived professional identities of educators and administrators in both mainstream and special education sectors, as well as those of the psychologists and others whose roles are generated by the character of existing provisions.

Institutional change of this order and at this level can come about, if at all, only as a result of movement in ideas and associated attitudes. In the present case, this means the development over time of a more generous and flexible way of understanding education. Tub thumping will not take us very far with this: from the few directions given in the foregoing paragraphs, it is clear that a great deal of patient analysis is required. Just how far we can move towards inclusiveness is likely to depend, ultimately, on the extent to which people are prepared, and encouraged, to do this work.

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