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## **Does Special Education Have a Role to Play in the Twenty-First Century?**

**Such has been the extent of the failure of special education that nothing short of a complete deconstruction of the whole system will suffice to ensure that its reconstruction in the twenty-first century will see the emergence of an enterprise that will be enabling, liberating and integrative for everyone.**

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**DR. MIKE OLIVER is Professor of Disability Studies at the University of Greenwich, London.**

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### **SPECIAL EDUCATION: A HISTORY OF FAILURE**

In most countries in the world throughout most of the twentieth century, the education of disabled children has been provided on a separate, segregated and special basis. The history of this provision has been one of abject failure, whatever criteria we use to judge it. If we say the purpose of such provision is to provide an equivalent education to that of non-disabled children, it has failed. If we say its purpose is to provide a basis for the full integration and participation into society of disabled children when they become adults, it has failed. If we say that its purpose is to provide a special form of education to meet the special needs of disabled children, again it has failed.

I do not make these claims lightly nor do I intend to use this failure as an opportunity to 'bash' those responsible for the system. The failure has been disastrous for all of us. It has been disastrous for all of us who pay taxes to support a system which socialises children into long-term dependency. It has been disastrous for those children who have been so socialised in that they have lived, and are living, impoverished and restricted lives. It has been disastrous for many committed and imaginative professionals who have devoted their professional lives to a system which has, ultimately, kept most of their children out of society rather than integrated them into it.



## **A DECONSTRUCTION OF THE WHOLE SYSTEM**

Such has been the extent of this failure that nothing short of a complete deconstruction of the whole enterprise of special education will suffice to ensure that its reconstruction in the twenty first century will see the emergence of an enterprise that will be enabling, liberating and integrative for us all. What I have to say is a first step in this journey; a journey in which we all, disabled people, professionals, policy makers and citizens must embark. If the prospect of such a journey seems a long and daunting one, then we would do well to remember the words of Chairman Mao when he said that 'the longest journey begins with the first step'.

This failure has prompted reviews of the special education system in many parts of the world. In Britain there was the Warnock Report (DES 1978); in Ireland there has been the recent publication of the report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993). There is much in common in these reports and they share the same basic assumption: - that it is the existing system that needs to be improved. For many years I had much sympathy with that assumption. Indeed I even served on such a major review myself and signed the published report (ILEA 1985).

I no longer believe that such 'tinkering', however radical and no matter what motives it is driven by, is enough to remedy the massive failures of special education that we have witnessed in the past hundred years. I will go further and suggest that nothing short of a radical deconstruction of special education and the reconstruction of education in totality will be enough, even if such a journey takes us another hundred years.

## **SPECIAL AND ORDINARY: A DISCOURSE OF INCOMPATIBILITY**

A brief discussion of the tinkering approach in Britain will help explain why deconstruction is necessary. Arising from the concern of the Warnock Committee (DES 1978) to de-medicalise the education of 'handicapped children', 'special' was the label chosen to refer to the kinds of provision these children (who were themselves re-defined as having learning difficulties) would need. Such terminology was accepted by Government and incorporated into the Education Act (1981).

There were three reasons for this change in terminology; firstly to try to replace negative labels ('delicate', 'sub-normal' etc.) with more positive ones; secondly



to switch the focus from the child's medical to their educational needs; and thirdly, to provide a linguistic basis to enable both the provision and practice of special education to continue. It could, thus, be said that the Warnock Report and the subsequent legislation tried to change the discourse of special education from a medical to an educational one.

It tried and failed for exactly the same reason that the current policy of care in the community is also failing in Britain; there are fundamental incompatibilities between the discourse of care and the discourse of entitlement in respect of the provision of welfare services in exactly the same way as there are fundamental incompatibilities between the discourse of the special and the discourse of the ordinary in respect of educational provision. These incompatibilities make both provision and practice contemporaneously difficult and ultimately impossible.

### **EVIDENCE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND OFFICIAL POLICY**

Testament to this are the personal experiences of 'special people':

"All my life I have known that I was 'different' - special even - because that 'fact' has been brought home to me by the reactions of people around me. They either go out of their way to be nice to me, ignore me, or go out of their way to be awful to me, and it took me a long, long time to realise that these reactions were not necessarily to do with the kind of person I was, rather with what people assumed I was". (Gradwell, 1992, p.17).

The discourse of the special then, has served to keep people apart from the rest of society rather than integrate them within it.

Further, it is not just at the level of personal experience that this discourse has kept people out of society but it has also failed at the policy level because

The phrase 'special educational needs', for example, frequently justifies the separation of disabled children from non-disabled children into segregated special schools. (Barnes, 1993 p.8).

And even where the philosophy of integrating the special into the ordinary has prevailed, the result has still been one where whole groups have been separated from each other.

The only solution to this, in my view, is the complete deconstruction of these



discourses of the special and the ordinary. Denney, in a study of racism within probation practice, suggests that a first step towards resolving the problem is deconstruction.

“The deconstruction of official discourse could provide the beginnings of a process that penetrates dominant and discriminatory conventions”.  
(Denney 1992 p.135).

### **CALLING FOR A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF FLEXIBILITY**

But there is a danger that simply deconstructing discourses may make the problem disappear altogether. Hart (1994), in an as yet unpublished study of special needs practice, draws attention to the position taken by the National Commission on Education (1993) in Britain, that ‘flexibility to respond to individual pupils’ difficulties may in future prove more successful than maintaining a separate category of “special” need. While coming to the conclusion that maintaining the term ‘special’ is untenable, she warns

...that simply to dispense with a concept of ‘special’ education, now that the distinction has been acknowledged to be untenable, would not serve the best interests of children. The former distinction needs to be replaced by a new distinction of quite a different order, which will help to establish and articulate a convincing alternative to individual-deficit ways of conceptualising and pursuing concerns about children’s learning. (Hart 1994 p.270).

In other words, old or existing discourses need to be replaced.

### **A NEW DISCOURSE OF EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS**

The discourse of rights, both human and civil, has played a major role, not just in disability politics in recent years, but in the struggles of oppressed peoples all over the world. Adopting such a discourse in respect of the reconstruction of education (in which the categories special and ordinary may disappear) will require us to broaden our understanding of the issues in fundamental ways.

To begin with, our current segregative practices and segregated provision, which continue to dominate the education of disabled children, (not to mention the way we continue to talk about it) have to be seen for what they are: the denial of rights to disabled people in just the same way as others are denied their rights in



other parts of the world and in other areas of their lives.

As I wrote in a review of a recent re-appraisal of special education:

The lessons of history through the segregation of black people in the United States and current struggles to end segregation in South Africa have shown this to be so. To write as if segregation in schools, or from public transport systems or from public spaces or inter-personal interactions in our own society is somehow different, is to de-politicise the whole issue. (Oliver, 1991).

### **BROADENING THE ISSUE: INCLUSION/EXCLUSION**

What is both interesting and unfortunate about the discourse of special education is that it has been dominated by the integration/segregation debate. What has characterised this debate has been its narrowness in terms of its failure to see integration as anything other than a technical debate about the quality of educational provision. Its failure to explicitly develop any connections with other debates about segregation of, for example, disabled people from public transportation systems, or of blind people from public information, or of people who are poor from major parts of our cities, has been a major omission.

What is at stake in this dispute within the integration/segregation debate is nothing less than our view of both the nature of social reality and the role of politics in society. One view sees integration as a humanitarian response to unintended consequences in our past history which can be changed by the development of paternalistic policies. The alternative view suggests that

“Integration is not a thing that can be delivered by politicians, policy makers or educators, but a process of struggle that has to be joined”. (Oliver, 1992 p.143).

And in recognition of that, it is perhaps time we renamed this debate as inclusion/exclusion rather than integration/segregation. The reason for this change is that the idea of integration has largely been a static one about location whereas inclusion is a process which

...fundamentally challenges the traditional approach which regards impairment and disabled people as marginal, or an ‘afterthought’ instead of recognising that impairment and disablement are a common experience



of humanity, and should be a central issue in the planning and delivery of a human service such as education. (Mason and Reiser, 1994 p.41).

## **DECONSTRUCTING SCHOOL AND TEACHER RESPONSES**

Central to changing the name of the debate from integration to inclusion is a deconstruction of school and teacher responses to special children. Current educational wisdom suggests that schools must change in order to accommodate children with special needs. The kinds of changes necessary relate to the establishment of special needs departments, the provision of support services both internal and external to the school, the development of whole school policies and the implementation of education authority-wide integration policies. These organisational changes need to be planned in advance and properly resourced with a clear vision of the aims and objectives necessary to achieve integration.

As far as teachers are concerned, it is usually assumed that teachers need to acquire extra knowledge and different skills in order to facilitate the process of integration. Changes in teacher education at both initial and in-service levels have tended to reinforce this. The problem is, of course, beyond the additions in knowledge and skills that any professional working in a new area would be expected to provide, it is hard to specify what this new knowledge or these new skills might be.

## **RECONSTRUCTING SCHOOL AND TEACHER RESPONSES**

This implies fundamental changes which go beyond the organisational and the professional. Reconstruction on the basis of rights to inclusion suggests that there must be changes in the ethos of the school which must mean that the school becomes a welcoming environment for all children; that there is no questioning of the rights of any to be there and that organisational changes are part of an acceptance and understanding of the fact that the purpose of schools is to educate all children, not merely those who meet an increasingly narrowing band of selection criteria, whether those selection criteria are imposed by governments, professional groups or schools themselves.

In addition, the arguments usually advanced against integration until teachers have been properly trained can be seen as rationalisations to preserve the status quo rather than genuine concerns about the inabilities of teachers to cope with a whole range of new demands. In my view, teaching is teaching, regardless of the



range or needs of pupils, and an essential prerequisite of inclusion is the acquisition of a commitment on the part of all teachers to work with all children, regardless of their needs. Only when teachers acquire this commitment can inclusion truly be achieved.

### **DECONSTRUCTING THE CURRICULUM**

It is not just school organisation and professional practice that needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed but the curriculum also, as this lies at the heart of the educational enterprise. In terms of the curriculum in respect of reforming special education, the usual intention is to try to ensure that children with special needs have access to exactly the same curriculum as everyone else and that curriculum delivery must change in order to ensure this access.

The problem with this is that it focuses on delivery rather than content. Nowhere is the issue of what is taught about disability considered for any children, whether they have special needs or not. Despite controversy, it is generally acknowledged that curriculum materials have, up to now, been sexist or racist in their content. And indeed, considerable progress has been made in developing non-sexist and non-racist curriculum materials, despite attempts by right wing critics to ridicule the project.

With one notable exception (Reiser and Mason, 1990), there has been no acknowledgement that disablism actually exists, let alone admit the fact that the curriculum is full of disablism materials; images of disability are almost always presented in negative stereotypes, assessment procedures are based upon narrow academic criteria and judgements about children's progress are usually based upon ethnocentric and disablism assumptions about normal child development.

### **RECONSTRUCTING THE CURRICULUM**

Reconstruction inevitably means that the ideology of 'normality' which underpins the curriculum and which, in its current version, preaches the acceptance and tolerance of children with special needs, will have to be abandoned. This view suggests that these people who are different have to be accepted and tolerated for after all, the different have come to accept and tolerate their difference so why shouldn't everyone else.

Such a view is underpinned by personal tragedy theory in terms of disability and deficit theory in educational terms. Tragedies and deficits are unfortunate chance



happenings and these poor individuals should not be made to suffer further through rejection and stigmatisation; hence they should be accepted and tolerated.

It must be replaced with a view which challenges the very notion of normality in education and in society generally and argues that it does not exist (Oliver, 1988). Normality is a construct imposed on a reality where there is only difference. This new view is underpinned by an entirely different philosophy, what might be called the politics of personal identity. This demands that difference not be merely tolerated and accepted but that it is positively valued and celebrated.

Such a reconstruction of the curriculum implies nothing less than a total reconstruction of the whole enterprise of education ; a task which we must begin with urgency if we are going to provide education for societies in the twenty-first century which will be organised around the idea of difference; a radical departure from twentieth century societies which have been organised around the idea of normality.

### **SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE: AN ISSUE OF EMPOWERMENT**

I am not attempting here to give you advice about what you should do in respect of your own educational enterprise. While you may have taken the first step on your journey with the publication of the SERC report, you still have time to make sure the journey is in the right direction; to frame legislation on the basis of rights to inclusion rather than the wish to integrate and to reconstruct your enterprise on the basis of celebration of difference rather than the maintenance of normality.

Finally, it is worth restating the point with which I began; that special, segregated education has been the main vehicle for educating disabled children throughout most of the industrialised world in the twentieth century and in Britain since 1890. In that hundred years, the special education system has failed to provide disabled children with the knowledge and skills to take their rightful place in the world; to use a current buzz word, it has failed to empower them.

According to one disabled American activist who played a crucial role in the recent passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), which some policy commentators have called the most far-reaching civil rights legislation ever passed, anywhere in the world:



The business of society is empowerment. The legitimate purpose of human rights, of human society and its governments, is not simply to guarantee equal opportunity to pursue the good life. The purpose, the absolute responsibility of society is to empower all of its members actually to produce and to live the good life. (Justine Dart).

This failure to empower is not something that will be tolerated in the twenty-first century. Disabled people, all over the world, are struggling to confront the processes that exclude and segregate them and to escape from the institutions that are part of that. The power of that struggle is captured in a quote from a conference of disabled people from all over Europe which met in Strasbourg in 1989.

Increasingly we disabled people are raising our voices to speak against warehousing of disabled people in special institutions and against the denial of basic equal and civil rights. We no longer accept segregation and paternalisation of disabled people by medical experts, policy makers and administrative officials.

### **TRANSLATING MORAL COMMITMENT TO POLITICAL RIGHTS**

What is needed as far as education is concerned, is a moral commitment to the inclusion of all children into a single education system as part of a wider commitment to the inclusion of all disabled people into society. Translating this moral commitment into political rights is something that can only be achieved by supporting disabled people and the parents of children with special needs as they struggle to empower themselves.

Support for these struggles may stem from a moral commitment but it must be properly resourced in terms of both money and other service, including those provided by professionals of all kinds. The history of the twentieth century for disabled people has been one of exclusion. The twenty-first century will see the struggle of disabled people for inclusion go from strength to strength. In such a struggle, special, segregated education has no role to play.

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