

Integration: Challenging the Protective Welfarism

The current trend towards integration often ignores the necessity for schools to question their whole educational philosophy. Schools tend to behave traditionally in an exclusive rather than an inclusive manner. Integration is a need not only for those within the special education system but for all children.

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INTRODUCTION

In the West, children who reach adolescence and have acquired labels as school failures are effectively abandoned....Those that slip into the separate special-school system as children with 'moderate learning difficulties' are probably treated with more sympathy. But the educational outcomes are the same (Sharon, 1987).

The education system by its nature breeds a very passive and acceptant approach by parents, students and professionals.

IRISH EDUCATION AND PROTECTIVE WELFARISM

Based on the mistaken idea that intelligence is limited and quantifiable and that only certain bits of it are really valuable, all sides have been very quick to place limits on what is possible. This is easy to understand because it protects all sides. Students can off-load much of their responsibility for their own progress on the basis that they have not got the ability to reach certain levels of achievement and trying is therefore a waste of time. The professionals can also ascribe poor achievement to lack of ability. This avoids their having to question inadequate services, poor teaching methods, inadequate training, traditional but outdated procedures, drastic underfunding and a myriad of other omissions which have led one Irish Professor of Education to describe the system as 'rootless and ruthless'.

Parents can also reach a state of quiet acceptance where they no longer insist on their rights as citizens of the state and allow their children to be, in Howard Sharon's (1987) words, 'abandoned' while they themselves often reap rich psychic rewards from their children's almost total dependence on them. All this is more a conditioned response of those involved than a conscious strategy for which they can be found culpable. However if we continue like this, then integration will simply mean that children presently in special schools will be treated with a little less sympathy than at present and abandoned just the same.

Integrated education is a much wider issue than taking children who are now in special schools and putting them into mainstream schools. This simply means putting yet another group in the mainstream school system. The reaction of the mainstream system to this new group will be the same as its reaction to the groups of students already in the system who have been labelled school failures. The real issue is as Dunne (1992) puts it: "a case for the progressive adaptation of educational structures to a new approach to education." This new approach to education centres around integration for all children.

INTEGRATION: A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

The issue of the integration of children from special schools into mainstream education may indeed be the catalyst that mainstream education needs in order, as Dunne (1992) says, "to change ourselves, our views and our strategies when they are no longer adequate to the task of educating our children". That our strategies are no longer adequate is hardly in question. Fourteen years ago Simon Nora and Alain Minc, two rather conservative high-ranking French civil servants, spoke of "...a Copernican revolution for pedagogy" (Nora and Minc, 1978). We have yet to begin what they saw as essential then. Five years ago a FAST report (No. 138) for the Commission of the European Communities said:

One of the most important of social and cultural phenomena in present-day Europe is the emergence of a pluralist society...it is, of course, a phenomenon which presents a major challenge to the educational systems of Europe...teachers have to prepare all pupils to live in a multicultural society of a kind not hitherto known (FAST Report, 1987).

We see very little evidence of any move to meet this challenge. A system seemingly incapable of such basic caring is hardly the place for even the most rugged young person. Three years ago Kathleen Lynch said of schools:

Rather, they *qualify* certain limited kinds of academic skills - particularly logical, mathematical and linguistic intelligences; they *demean* those intelligences Gardner (1983) defined as bodily-kinesthetic, spatial and musical by credentialising only limited aspects of them; and they disqualify and marginalise what I call love labour or solitary labour (the labour required to produce caring relations - supporting, encouraging, listening to others etc.) by not credentialising the intelligences associated with it at all (Lynch, 1989).

Schools at present marginalise many of their pupils. They do this by deciding what to ratify and what to make legitimate and what to exclude. The range of what is included is narrow. Schools tend to behave in an exclusive rather than inclusive manner and this does not provide a good basis for the belief that the system will suddenly become inclusive for children coming from special schools. If the parents of all marginalised children demand that schools become inclusive then there may be a positive response because these parents constitute a very large group indeed. Pressure from groups such as that which Seamus Dunne represents may bring parents together in their common cause and all such groups may be wise to consider cohesive action as part of their strategic plan.

THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL

Some of the characteristics which would make a school inclusive rather than exclusive can be identified. Others would undoubtedly grow out of the effort to develop such an institution. The central factor would be the potential of human beings. Dr. Richard Leakey (1979) is involved in studying humanity's three million year history. The potential for the human race, he feels, "is almost infinite". We have just barely begun to realise the potential of a human being. The experts are talking about "talents we haven't got words for". The unrealised potential for all human beings is staggering. It is sad that some people need reminding that, in this context, all human beings include those presently designated as "handicapped". The inclusive school must have a deep rooted belief in the potential of every human being and be completely unwilling to abandon anyone.

NO PROTECTIVE WELFARISM

The inclusive school must be willing, and able, to challenge everyone and to realise that everyone has a right to be challenged. Such a school would abandon any notion of protective welfarism where people are removed from all exposure

to challenge in the mistaken belief that they need to be protected “for their own good”. The acceptance of the person’s ability and right to grow would be central to such an institution. This type of challenge should not be confused with the philosophy of rugged individualism so often found in industrial societies.

THE HOLISTIC VIEW

The notion of segmenting a human being, (which probably began with Descartes), and then giving different values to various segments has had an influence far beyond what might be expected. The reason for this is that individual humans tend not to see themselves in the segments into which they are officially divided. A professional, for instance, may tell a child that their ability to solve quadratic equations is not very high. The professional may be quite conscious that the child’s ability to write good English, be a good parent, play football or sing beautifully is excellent. However the child, being human, may well conclude from the expressed opinion about quadratic equations that he/she is quite stupid as a human being. The affect will soon be seen in his/her singing and footballing ability. Humans must be treated in a holistic fashion because humans operate on a remarkably efficient feed-back system and it is impossible to effect a human in isolated segments. This is basic to an integrated school system. Education must integrate its view of the human being. It can not therefore make segmented judgements about its clients and extend these judgements to the total human being.

EQUALITY IS NOT SAMENESS

The inclusive school must also rid itself of the notion that equal treatment for humans can be achieved by giving each person the same treatment. Quite simply human beings are not all the same. A differentiated curriculum is a first step. Recognising individual need and catering for it is the attainable goal. This may not be as expensive as some wish it to sound because the present resources being devoted to the custodial aspects of the system would become largely unnecessary and could be used for other things.

A WEALTH OF LEARNING

The inclusive school must realise that every person that comes to it brings value to every other human being there. It must stop thinking that it is doing the giving and appreciate what it is receiving. The present segregation limits the experiences and the learning of those in segregated schools. In this context

children presently in special schools would bring a wealth of learning to a mainstream school.

Parent power is the only mechanism that has any chance of bringing the integrated school into being and it is only in an integrated school that children from special schools will find any benefit.

THE DANGERS

Things however being what they are, integration from special schools poses a serious threat to many children.

- 1 It is uncertain that the hoped for socializing benefits will actually happen because children and teachers in ordinary local schools have been deprived of the experience of these children.
- 2 Schools already discriminate and may simply discriminate yet again. This would result in very poor treatment indeed.
- 3 The record of the Department of Education in the provision of inservice training for teachers does not furnish any grounds for the belief that necessary training will be provided. The record is littered with broken promises.
- 4 The record of successive Governments' financial provision in this area could lead one to expect very little financial support for what is an expensive project.
- 5 There are some grounds for the suspicion that integration may be seen as a cheap option to the present system if it can be achieved on the basis of vague promises and non-statutory agreements.
- 6 Integration once done can not be undone.

THE HOPE

Parental demand for the rights of their children to a fair and just educational provision for all may indeed lead to integration which is properly funded and within which there are legislative guarantees of financial and other essential support services. This integration is a need not only of those presently within the special school system but of all our children.

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