WHEN INCLUSION BECOMES EXCLUSION

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Abstract

This paper considers the current situation regarding the use of special educational settings within the range of provision available to children with special educational needs. Argument is put forward that notions of inclusion which imply educating all children in mainstream schools may be detrimental to meeting individual needs and lead to experiences of exclusion for some children. Issues of human rights and equal opportunities are explored in terms of tensions between what is intended by educators and the received experience for individual children. A way forward is suggested for the debate about how to most effectively include all children.

Jamie stood at the side of the playground, watching the other boys kicking a football. He'd given up asking if he could join in because he knew what the answer would be. The whistle blew for the end of playtime and he went reluctantly to his classroom. There would be no escape there. Mrs Poole was kind enough, but he hated being the only one who had to have an extra helper.

"Why do I have to be different," he said to himself, " it's just not fair."

Today was worse than usual, because most of the boys in his class were going off to a football match. Jamie knew he was a good footballer, or at least much better at football than he was at reading or number, but they told him he wasn't good enough to be in the team. When the other boys went off, Mrs Poole found Jamie's concentration was worse than usual.

"Jamie, I know you find this hard, but you won't get anywhere unless you try."

Jamie's frustration boiled over.

"There's no point," he shouted at her. "Even if I try, I'm no good at anything."

He rushed out of the room and collided with the head teacher, who told him off for running in the corridor.

Origins of the Current Situation

The origins of the current situation can be briefly summarised as follows. Until the 1980s, special schools were seen as the civilised and acceptable alternative to mainstream education for the two per cent of pupils who were considered to be the most 'handicapped.' Indeed, specialist provision had been seen as even more necessary after the passing of the 1970 Education Act, which, for the first time, had brought all children into the education system, including those with the most limited

cognitive ability. However, after the Warnock Report of 1978 and the subsequent 1981 Education Act, the integration bandwagon began to roll and special schools were denigrated by many for trying to hang on to what was interpreted as an outmoded system of segregating pupils (Dessent 1987). The notion of 'integration' was about helping pupils to integrate into mainstream education. In its turn this concept was replaced by that of 'inclusion' with the attendant notion that the whole school should become a supportive community, absorbing all those who wished to attend.

Blurring the Differences

In our view, the inclusion debate has been taken to an unhelpful extreme by some who argue that *all* pupils should be included in mainstream education and, therefore, that there should be no specialist provision in the form of special school settings. Oliver (1996), for instance, looks forward to the day when disabled people win the fight for full inclusion and "*special, segregated provision has no role to play*," (cited in Hornby et al, 1997, p.68). We believe that this has narrowed the debate to one of location, rather than a consideration of where each child might be more genuinely included and importantly might *feel* most included. We would argue that it is time for more realism and less extremism, so that the emphasis shifts from a preoccupation with where a child's education is located to how to provide appropriate educational experiences for pupils who have special educational needs within an inclusive educational system.

The Warnock Committee's use of the term 'special educational needs' (SEN), was a praiseworthy attempt to recognise a much larger group of pupils, (i.e. 20 per cent of

the school population). At the same time the focus shifted from categorising pupils according to their difficulty, to emphasising the importance of considering each child as an individual who could be placed somewhere along a continuum ranging from those whose difficulties were mild and temporary to those with the most complex needs. Unfortunately, using the umbrella term 'SEN' to cover this huge range, had the effect of blurring the very real differences in trying to provide for various groups of pupils within this continuum. For instance, the physically impaired with no learning difficulties may be readily accommodated in a mainstream school, with the sole proviso that physical adaptations are made to the environment and that issues of safety are resolved. However, there is no equivalence in terms of level of adaptations required and kind of issues involved when, for example, educators seek to enable pupils with limited cognitive ability, or with emotional and behavioural difficulties, to learn as readily and effectively as their peers within a mainstream setting.

Here we are suggesting that access to the same curriculum delivered in largely the same way may lead to an equal opportunity to learn for some pupils with special needs but not all. We are not saying simply that some special needs are more special than others but rather that there are qualitative differences across the range of special needs which require of educators different kinds of consideration and subsequently different kinds of solution. When the notion of inclusion does not encapsulate these qualitative dimensions but aggregates all within the same solution then it fails to help those it purports to help. Indeed, it may be significant that some of the most vocal proponents of mainstream schooling for all, have had physical rather than intellectual or emotional difficulties.

Human Rights

The doubts we raise above have not stopped campaigners, such as The Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education, (CSIE), turning the debate into a human rights issue (Farrell, 2001), with parents being advised that it is their right to have their child educated in a mainstream school. A consequence here is, of course, that those working in special schools are made to feel that they are at variance with their pupils' educational entitlement. The important question however is, 'a human right to what?' Certainly, we would argue that all children have a right to education, and, further, that the education offered to them should be equal to that on offer to others. But what counts as equal is less straightforward. It is already commonly accepted that positive discrimination is necessary if all children are to benefit from educational opportunities. So a hearing impaired child may need extra physical resources (e.g. hearing aids) and extra attention (e.g. specialist teaching) in order to have an equal chance to gain the possible benefits of education.

Our argument is that, in the same way, if children are to have equality of opportunity then they may need access to appropriate specialist attention, which is most effectively, for them, delivered in an appropriate specialist setting. The task for those charged with setting out the structure of an educational system that will cater for the needs of all, is to focus on what is appropriate, rather than assuming that commonality of location is an all-embracing solution. In our view, there is little point in having a right to something that is not appropriate, and indeed may actually be harmful, as we would suggest an inappropriate placement may be. A child with autism, for instance, may not be able to learn, and may suffer actual physical distress, from being placed in the bustle and noise of a mainstream classroom. This is as perverse as suggesting that

a starving child has a right to food, even if the kind of food being offered will not provide appropriate nourishment.

Raising Standards

Ironically, the battle for inclusion has been fought alongside the drive to raise standards. The 1988 Education Act introduced the national curriculum which, while purporting to be a curriculum for all, actually made it harder for pupils with learning difficulties to be included. Such children had gained an entitlement, but to a curriculum and its assessment that was not necessarily entirely relevant to their needs. Certainly, all pupils were not included in the original conception of the curriculum and its assessment (Jordan & Powell, 1994). The national literacy and numeracy strategies which followed made the curriculum even more prescribed, making little allowance for pupils who needed to work at a different level and pace, or whose curriculum ought to encompass therapeutic, sensory or developmental elements. The emphasis on making more and more pupils reach average and above levels of attainment at the end of the key stages, means that achievement is increasingly measured only in academic terms. The sheer number of assessments and the emphasis placed on them sits uncomfortably with an agenda where everyone is supposed not only to be included but also to *feel* themselves to be included.

Inclusion as a Primarily Social Concept

Inclusion is primarily a social concept. It requires that the person feels a sense of social belonging. Individuals tend to sense their own belonging within defined, relatively small social groupings (one of us 'belongs' to the University of Hertfordshire, rather than to Higher Education in general; the other to Woolgrove

School, in particular, and then to a wider group of schools). To feel included, children need to feel that they belong within their school, not within the much more amorphous and nebulous concept of schooling. Those inclusionists who argue for mainstreaming of all pupils are in danger of emphasising location as the resolution of a wider ideal, at the expense of the real issue of social cohesion within groups accepted within the whole. Few of us enjoy feeling odd or different, and unhappy pupils are less likely to be successful learners. So we would argue that the central debate should shift to considering where a particular child is likely to feel most included.

The true sense of the term 'inclusion' involves an acceptance of diversity within a whole; of including all within common aspirations; of enabling all to feel respected and valued for themselves. The aim, then, of those able to contrive contexts within which others can learn and develop is to provide settings where diversity can be accepted, aspirations best achieved and respect and value most readily found. Our suggestion here is that for some children these things are most likely to be achieved in special settings where appropriate provision can be targeted, rather than in a common situation where the needs of the majority may militate against meeting the needs of a minority, despite the very best intentions to the contrary. The irony here is that in the very process of seeking to pursue a policy of inclusion, there is a danger of exacerbating feelings of 'oddness' and 'difference' – of excluding the 'included' child from the real meaning of inclusion, which involves this sense of belonging to, and being accepted by, a community. After all, nobody is ever included in all the subsets of society. Readers of this article will all be able to identify areas of social life where they would feel an outsider if they were to enter. Of course, we as adults have some

choice in where we wish to involve ourselves and children do not necessarily have this option when it comes to schooling. All the more reason, then, that we exercise the choice we make, on their behalf, with care. Children need to be educated where they are most likely to experience a sense of belonging and an ability to contribute – again, where they are most likely to feel included.

An Environment for Inclusion ?

So, where a child is most likely to experience a feeling of inclusion rather than exclusion will depend on two things: the curriculum on offer and the environment in which that curriculum is delivered.

As far as the curriculum itself is concerned, the questions to ask are: 'does it have to be individualised to such an extent that the child is effectively excluded from that which is being experienced by the other children?' 'Is there another setting where the differentiation would be significantly less?' These questions of course apply equally to mainstream and to special settings. The ideal will always be to find the setting in which a particular individual is able to be included with his peers to the greatest possible extent, where the sum of his/her differences does not militate against feelings of acceptance and belonging. In the vignette with which we opened this paper it is clear that Jamie needs to feel accepted, to have the same opportunities to participate in the wider curriculum, whether it be sporting activities, musical concerts, dramatic productions, or clubs. Such opportunities would enable Jamie to feel valued by others and therefore to develop a more robust sense of self-esteem.

As to the environment, the questions to ask are: 'how far is it realistic to expect the school to adjust what it provides in order to meet the child's needs?' 'How far is it reasonable to expect the child to adjust to an environment that is necessarily geared to the needs of the majority?' We have seen examples where schools have achieved great successes, in terms of including children with very special needs, through determination and by use of considerable individual initiatives. But equally we have seen examples where, despite the very best of intentions, factors such as extensive buildings, large classes, lack of therapeutic input, lack of specialist knowledge have meant that particular children's needs have not been met. We suggest that the heuristic that should be applied is that the more complex the child's needs, then the more the school system and the individuals within it should be prepared to adapt to the needs of the child, rather than expect the child to make the adjustments. After all, one of the marks of a civilised society is that the strong should adapt to the weak rather than expect the weak to adapt to the strong (Peeters, 1997).

Working Together in an Inclusive System

Rather than what we interpret as a promulgation of an unattainable, so-called ideal of making all schools suit all children, we would argue for a range of provision within an inclusive educational system, where each can find his or her place. Belatedly, the government is clearly signalling a dual role for special schools, rather than their closure. In the recent DfES publication 'Inclusive Schooling,' paragraph 53 states:

> *"The Government recognises and values the important role special schools (maintained, independent and non-maintained) play in providing for pupils with special educational needs. Special schools have a continuing and vital role to play within an inclusive education system."*

It makes much more sense for mainstream and special schools to work closely together within an inclusive system, than to expect all schools to cater for all pupils; or indeed to expect all pupils, even those with the most complex and entrenched needs, to feel comfortable within a common environment. Children do have rights. They have the right to be in a situation that gives them the best opportunity of accessing a curriculum designed to meet their needs, in an environment where they feel valued for themselves (which clearly provides for their differences as well as for their commonalities) rather than simply different.

It is time that all of those involved in the organisation and delivery of schooling recognise the damage that has already been done to some of our most vulnerable pupils, by reducing the specialist placements that are available in some areas of the country to meet their needs. There needs to be a concerted determination to ensure that more, rather than fewer, opportunities should be made available in future. This is not an extreme view. It is one that recognises the uniqueness of every individual and seeks to celebrate difference not obscure it.

Jamie stood by the side of the playground, watching the boys kicking a football. It was the first day at his new school. Mum had told him that it was a special school but he didn't really know what that meant. He had been glad to find that there was no special helper for him and that the class was small. Most of the children seemed friendly and some had been keen to look after him. But now he was out at playtime.

He wanted to join in the impromptu game of football he was watching, but, instead, he turned away, trying to blot out the memories that came flooding back. Then he heard someone call his name. He stopped, wondering whether there was another Jamie. He saw that it was Sam from his class who had called to him.

"Jamie, do you like football? Come on, we've got a match soon."

A few weeks later, Jamie was standing with the rest of the school team, identically dressed in their maroon and cream kit. This was his first match ever and he was determined that his side would win. The match was close. Jamie was tired, but he kept on running. Just before the final whistle, the other side scored the winning goal. Jamie felt like crying. He had tried so hard and he had wanted to win so badly. In Assembly the next morning, the head teacher, Mr Sharpe, asked the football team to come to the front. Jamie followed the others. Mr Sharpe congratulated the team and said he had been very pleased to hear how well they had played. He was sure they would soon win a match if they kept on practising. All of a sudden, Jamie realised it didn't matter that they'd lost. What was important was that he had done his best, and, better still, he was part of the team.

"This is my school now," he thought, as he looked at the rows of children in front of him.

"This is where I belong."

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Biographies

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