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Atkins, Liz

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LIZ ATKINS

*Tom, Ollie and Emily: Reflections on Inclusion as an Exclusive Experience*

## Introduction

It is well recognised that individuals who belong to non-dominant or marginalised groups, such as those with disabilities or those from minority ethnic groups, are subject to various forms of overt and covert discrimination in their daily lives and in their interactions with organisations, institutions and broader structures such as the education system. This paper explores the experiences of three young people who formed part of a small scale study exploring young people's experience of inclusion in education. The young people had varying degrees of physical disability and the evidence from the study suggests that some of the strategies put in place to facilitate the inclusion of young people in education can, conversely, result in exclusive experiences for the individual(s) concerned.

Inclusion in education has become big business internationally over the past two decades and is enshrined in law in many countries including those making up the United Kingdom. Much has been published on the desirability of inclusion in education, as a means of working towards social justice, as well as on what may or may not be described as 'good practice' in terms of inclusion. This body of work encompasses all stages of education, and much of it is predicated on the assumption that inclusion, in terms of strategies such as addressing individual needs in the classroom, is a 'good thing'. That does not mean that I am making an argument against inclusive practice: rather, my concern is with the uncritical use of inclusive policies and practices which can, and often do, have unintended and often un-noticed consequences for the young person being 'included'. Over time, we have become so comfortable with the concept of inclusion (and, in some organisations, comfortable with the belief that inclusion is 'successful') that it has evolved into a notion that we have largely ceased to question, in terms of both the discourse and the practice surrounding it. Instead, as Graham and Slee (2008:277) have suggested, we are increasingly using inclusive education as a means for 'explaining and protecting the status quo' rather than as a means for developing more radical and democratic forms of education. In other words, inclusive education is predicated on taken-for-granted assumptions about the Other as well as on a set of beliefs about the relative effectiveness of strategies for inclusion. Secure in the knowledge that we are 'doing' inclusion, as practitioners we often fail to question or even consider these critical issues. And yet, if as education practitioners our aim is to make social justice, then we have a *responsibility* to explore and to problematise such issues. Only by doing this can we try to understand what is *really* happening in the educational lives of young people who experience different forms of exclusion and marginalisation in the context of their positioning within a homogenised and deficit model of disability.

## Methodology

This paper draws on three case studies to illustrate the ways in which young people with different abilities have experienced different degrees of exclusion in the context of the

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inclusive practice of the institution at which they were students. The small scale qualitative study in which these young people participated was developed as a pilot for a more extensive study. It utilised a snowball sampling method and data were collected online with the young people initially responding to a series of open questions. One of the young people profiled here later participated in a telephone interview. All the young people who participated did so voluntarily after hearing about the study from a friend. Two of those included in this paper reported on their experiences of Further Education and one of his experiences of Higher Education. Consistent with the ethical framework for the study, all participants and organisations have been anonymised in this paper. Data were analysed using a thematic approach which explored responses related specifically to instances of inclusion and exclusion.

The following stories are about Tom, Ollie and Emily. All three define themselves as disabled, and all three have required some degree of learning support throughout their educational careers.

### **Ollie and Emily**

Emily is a wheelchair user as a consequence of post-meningitis neuropathy. She is also diabetic. Ollie has a rare degenerative and life-limiting condition akin to muscular dystrophy and is also a wheelchair user. Both attended a specialist school for children with disabilities before moving on to Isaac Newton Further Education College. The college has a long history of partnership with local schools, including those categorised as 'Special Schools', and prides itself on its inclusive approach to education. Although Emily stated that she did not feel excluded in any way during her education, she did note that 'I wasn't very good at socialising with able-bodied students at Newton College' implying some degree of social separation between those young people with obvious disabilities and those without. Although Ollie had less difficulty socially, and has a wide circle of friends including both 'disabled' and 'able-bodied', he had his own source of irritation: '**why**, when everything was so inclusive in the classroom, did they make all the disabled kids sit together at lunchtime?! You couldn't move around and talk to your friends'.

### **Tom**

Tom is 23. He has a severe form of cerebral palsy and uses an electric wheelchair. He requires the support of a 24/7 carer and uses a motability vehicle. Tom is studying for an undergraduate degree at a UK university. The University, like the schools Tom attended, has made considerable efforts to enable him to access his degree programme.

Yet Tom feels socially excluded at university, and recounts stories of both subtle and unsubtle forms of exclusion. For example, he describes feeling excluded because, as a wheelchair user, 'you can't sit with mates in class because the lecture halls are like cinemas and stepped'. Similarly, social interactions are hampered because 'between lectures I have to go the accessible way which isn't always the main route', thus separating him from his peers. The solution to these difficulties is obvious as far as he is concerned: '[organisations should make] disability access the main focus rather than a spin off'. In addition to these challenges, which exemplify ways he feels excluded, Tom

describes facing subtle forms of exclusion. Tom's disabilities mean that he requires a note-taker; he explained that in terms of learning '[I] need help note-taking and revising [and] struggle to write lots'. Whilst the note-taker is clearly an essential support in terms of **inclusion**, Tom noted that 'in group activities my note-taker can get in way of my own interactions', illustrating the way in which some interventions intended to support an individual can be both **inclusive** and **exclusive**.

### **Social in/exclusion**

These stories reflect tensions between the students and the commitment to inclusion and equality the institution makes explicit. Importantly, Ollie and Emily highlight the importance of social inclusion/exclusion in their lives, and Tom too gives it prominence in his story. In short spaces of time, such as that when Tom is using the 'accessible route' or sitting apart during lectures, the thread of conversations can change or be lost and group dynamics can shift, however imperceptibly. These changes in a group dynamic effectively leave young people such as Tom, who is compelled to leave his friends at times, constantly on the margins of their friendship group. This is significant since, whatever the intended acts of inclusion and integration, what appeared to be most important is to be socially included in leisure activities such as simply chatting or having lunch together with a peer group which included both disabled and non-disabled peers.

This suggests that, consistent with earlier research (Atkins, 2009:140) social and leisure activity is a significant aspect of identity formation in these young people's lives as they move towards adulthood and is the aspect of their lives to which they attach the greatest importance. This social aspect of education is of considerable importance to young people both with and without disabilities, although it is often overlooked. Importantly however, the challenges for disabled young people of overcoming social exclusion imply that the social aspects of education may assume proportionately greater significance for them than for their non-disabled peers as they make their transition to adulthood. Failure to see beyond the classroom in terms of inclusion will result in exclusionary practices such as those described by Emily and Ollie and may engender greater social exclusion for other young people in similar circumstances.

Within the classroom, failure to take account of changing group dynamics when a note-taker or other support worker is introduced also creates the potential for further exclusion. They have a professional role so are likely to inhibit relationships between the supported young person and their peers. And what is their role in a group activity? Is it to remain silent and scribe (which might create constraints in some group activities) or to participate (which could deny a voice to the young person)? And if interaction between the young person and their support worker is necessary, how might that impact on the peer group dynamic in that moment? Irrespective of the approach taken, as Tom says, the very presence of another person has implications for the relationships between the supported student and his peers. Thus, there was a tension between his need for a note taker to facilitate access to his chosen programme, and the way her presence created barriers to his personal interactions.

A recurring theme in every story the young people told concerned the barriers to personal interactions they kept encountering. Emily's sense of social separation from the people she perceived as 'other' – the non-disabled students – was indicative of hidden

forms of exclusion. Emily believed she wasn't very good at socialising with them rather than that they were not very good at socialising with her.

Isaac Newton College created another barrier by requiring their disabled students to sit in a designated area at lunchtime. Apparently the answer to Ollie's question about *why* he had to sit apart at lunchtimes was for reasons of health and safety. So is health and safety more important than enabling the social and leisure activities that contribute to identity formation? And if the issue of health and safety was paramount, perhaps in terms of ensuring the safe evacuation of people who use wheelchairs in an emergency, could no one think of a more effective way of addressing the concerns than segregating the disabled students? Approaches such as this reflect the way in which certain discriminatory practices become so normalised within an institution – even one with a commitment to inclusive practice and equality – that professionals cease to question them. But such practices contribute to the marginalisation of certain groups of young people. Situations such as Ollie's highlight the need for practitioners to constantly problematise and question practice and ask: 'what are we doing and why are we doing it? What are the consequences of our actions and for whom?'

### Discourses of in/exclusion

I have argued that the education system exerts particularly oppressive forms of power and control over young people in the context of the discourse it uses to describe them (e.g. see Atkins 2009; 2010). It does this by homogenising young people into deficit models associated with specific characteristics the group is perceived to have. And the discourse used always has negative connotations. Thus people who are unable to conform to the requirements of secondary education are described as 'disaffected' and 'disruptive' or 'disengaged'. Similarly, we discuss disability as opposed to ability and describe some young people (often including the 'disaffected' or 'disengaged') as having *special* educational *needs*. The term *need* implies a want or deficit, as well as a form of dependency. We hear anecdotal evidence that some pupils use the word 'special' as a derogatory noun (as, indeed, is 'widening participation'). The use by young people of derogatory discourse reflects the underlying negative and exclusive societal attitudes in spite of a long standing inclusion agenda in schools and universities. This alone is proof that education has made inadequate headway in challenging marginalisation and exclusion and moving towards a more socially just and democratic system of education. [is this what's meant in last sentence?](#)

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Normative attitudes and perceptions are also reflected in the inconsistency between the general sensitivity of some teachers to their pupils' needs and their emotional regard in which they hold non-compliant pupils or those who do not seem 'bright' (Hedge and MacKenzie, 2012:332). Such inconsistencies and the use of discourses of deficit are indicative of a tension between our normative assumptions, reflected in the discourses we use, and the generally held belief that we are successfully 'doing' inclusion. Moreover, certain professional discourse when used unthinkingly can communicate negative messages to others. Terms associated with models of deficit, such as special educational needs, exert considerable power in terms of the way they define and Other particular groups in light of their perceived characteristics which differ from the norm. Characterising young people in this way has significant implications for their identity

formation. And this is likely to have a major impact on the relative success of their transition from school to adulthood.

### **Normative perceptions of in/exclusion**

Tom, Ollie and Emily attended colleges and Universities with significant commitment to equality and diversity, yet they experienced certain exclusionary practices. This highlights the importance of interrogating practice and exploring the issues surrounding and consequences of Inclusive Practice. But equally crucially, it raises questions about the centrist and normative perceptions of disability and inclusion held by policy makers and professionals at all levels and how such perceptions are communicated through professional discourse. These perceptions assume that we should be including the marginalised into a centre described by Graham and Slee as 'but a barren and fictional place' (2008:279) and also reflects 'inclusion's need to speak of and identify otherness' (Harwood and Rasmussen, 2002 cited Graham and Slee, Ibid).

Normative perceptions obstruct possible solutions to problems of exclusion such as those experienced by Tom. His idea that '[organisations should make] disability access the main focus rather than a spin off' seems simple and instrumental; after all, it was achieved at the Olympic Park and Athletes Village. So why not in educational institutions? Apart from the costs, the most significant barrier is because all aspects of education are constructed around normative perceptions of the world which effectively exclude anyone perceived to be different. Thus, achieving change demands far more than thoughtful planning: it demands 'disrupt[ing] the construction of centre from which the exclusion derives' (Graham and Slee, *ibid*). At a macro level this could even entail a transfer of power and control from the centre to the margins, something which would have significant policy and political implications.

At a more local level, disrupting the centre would imply taking a radically different view to inclusion in education. This would necessitate all teachers committing to the principles of equality and social justice in education. The assumption that all teachers are so committed is one of the taken-for-granted surrounding the concept of inclusion, and yet, as research amongst trainee teachers demonstrates, they hear messages in schools that conflict with the pro-inclusion messages they hear in the university (Beacham and Rouse, 2012: 12). It seems that some teachers retain negative, normative societal attitudes and perceptions which influence the ways in which inclusive practice is implemented.

**HERE**

**Comment [s3]:** Not sure what this comment means Gillian!!

### **Conclusions**

This small study has raised two key issues. Firstly, it is apparent from the data that some inclusive practices are having an exclusionary impact on young people that goes unnoticed – except by them. It also shows that the forms of exclusion that most concern young people are the aspects of social exclusion which prevent them establishing and maintaining peer relationships in the same way that less marginalised young people can. This is clearly an area which demands further investigation. Practitioners have a responsibility to critically examine inclusive practices within the classroom and the institution to understand how these impact on the education and lives

of young people. Only by small steps like this can we hope to move towards a future in which all young people, irrespective of their similarity or difference to one another, can enjoy a truly socially just and democratic education.

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### Correspondence

Dr Liz Atkins teaches at the School of Education and Professional Development, University of Huddersfield

Email: [l.atkins@hud.ac.uk](mailto:l.atkins@hud.ac.uk)