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# **A critical interrogation of the contemporary discourses associated with inclusive education in England**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the standards agenda works in opposition to the inclusion agenda, despite government rhetoric which suggests that both agendas are complementary. The paper emphasises the need to embrace a broader understanding of what constitutes *achievement* in order to enable all learners to experience success. In developing this critique of recent and current policies of inclusion, the paper draws on earlier papers which have contributed to the debate. This paper argues that the current Code of Practice (DFES, 2001) perpetuates a deficit model of the child which is largely at odds with notions of inclusion.

## **Key Words**

Inclusion  
Special Educational Needs  
Social model  
Medical model  
Achievement

## **Introduction**

The Warnock Report (DES, 1978), commissioned by Margaret Thatcher, signalled the development of a policy of integrating increasing numbers of children with special educational needs into mainstream schools. Integration placed an onus on the child to fit into a largely unchanged system.

Subsequent policies have focused on inclusion, which places an onus on

schools to proactively provide an effective education for all children. The signing of the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) marked an international commitment to inclusive education of children within *regular* schools. Successive policies in England under the Labour government (for example DFEE, 1997; DFEE, 1998; DFES, 2004), along with disability discrimination legislation emphasised the need for schools to plan for inclusion and provide adjustments to enable children to access education. However, inclusion was firmly embedded within the over-arching policy discourse of raising standards for all learners, a relationship which many have argued was incompatible (Lunt and Norwich, 1999; Audit Commission, 2002; Cole, 2005), especially if measures of attainment are used to define '*achievement*' (Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rose, 2007). The House of Commons Select Committee Report (2006) emphasised the tensions between the raising standards agenda and the inclusion agenda. Additionally, it drew attention to the research which demonstrated that the highest performing state schools admitted fewer than their 'fair share' of children with special educational needs (Sutton Trust, 2006). This paper explores these issues as well as offering a critical examination of current government policies on inclusion.

### **Interpretations of inclusion**

Inclusion has dominated the political landscape as a policy agenda since 1997 (Sikes, Lawson and Parker, 2007). Under New Labour inclusion became part of the 'official script' for schools to translate into practice. However Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2002) have commented that 'inclusion is a

bewildering concept which can have a variety of interpretations and applications' (p.158). Consequently, practitioners' personal understandings of inclusion and official policy discourses ultimately affect the way in which inclusion is translated into practice.

As Smith states, professional values are neither stable nor coherent (Smith, 2007; 380). Sikes, Lawson and Parker (2007) emphasise that 'understandings of inclusion are not fixed or definite, but rather are 'becoming' developing and changing as they are articulated and lived' (p.367). Thus, inclusion is not a single fixed entity (Clough, 2000) with clear parameters.

Thomas and Loxley (2007) have argued that 'inclusion' has become something of a cliché (Thomas and Loxley, 2007), 'an international buzzword' (Benjamin, 2002: viii) devoid of meaning. Professionals claim to be 'inclusive' but 'understandings are not shared between, within and across individuals, groups ...and larger collectives' (Sikes, Lawson and Parker, 2007: 357). Consequently, absence of a shared understanding of inclusion is likely to result in a multitude of practices both within and between schools under the banner of 'inclusion'.

It has been argued that:

...Inclusion is not another name for special educational needs... inclusion is seen to involve the identification and minimising of barriers to learning and participation and the maximising of resources to support learning and participation.

(Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins et al, 2000: 13)

Corbett and Slee (2000) have stressed that inclusion necessitates a continual, proactive response on the part of schools to meet the needs of learners. This sharply contrasts with the traditional notion of integration which placed a responsibility on the part of the child to adapt to an unchanged system. The metaphor of inclusion as a journey is now an established theme in the literature (Ainscow, 2000; Allan, 2000; Nind, 2005). Corbett (2001) refers to a 'connective pedagogy' (p.1), which connects the learner with their own way of learning, thus connecting them with the curriculum. She emphasises that 'where a school community is sensitive to its sub-cultures and gives them value and respect, it is an inclusive community' (Corbett, 2001:12). Carrington and Elkins (2005) have argued that 'above all, inclusion is about a philosophy of acceptance where all pupils are valued and treated with respect' (Carrington and Elkins, 2005: 86). Slee (2011) emphasises how inclusion represents a reconstruction of education in order to eliminate injustice. He argues that inclusion cannot be entangled with neo-liberal values which focus on competition and education for the purpose of economic productivity. Therefore inclusion is inextricably tied in with practitioners' personal values. This inevitably results in tensions as practitioners are required to implement the official scripts of inclusion, which often conflict with their personal understandings of inclusion. Sikes, Lawson and Parker (2007) found that people's own stories about inclusive practice frequently focused on discourses of *care* and *support* and within their research the rhetoric of inclusion policy was tenuously linked to the reality of the day-to-day practices of inclusion.

The inclusion agenda initially emphasised the rights of all children to be included in mainstream education. The early inclusion policies of New Labour stressed the importance of educating children with special needs in mainstream schools (DFEE, 1997), although subsequent policies identified the crucial role of special schools within the inclusion debate (DFES, 2004). Such contradiction within policy has resulted in confused messages about inclusion. The architect of the original Warnock Report (DES, 1978), Mary Warnock, has in more recent times, broadened the definition of inclusion by highlighting the benefits of both mainstream and segregated provision within the inclusion debate. She argues that 'inclusion should mean being involved in a common enterprise of learning, rather than being necessarily under the same roof' (Warnock, 2005: 36). For Warnock (2005), 'inclusion is not a matter of where you are geographically, but of where you feel you belong' (p.38).

Cole has argued that it is important to 'commit ourselves to the challenge of inclusion: to commit ourselves to 'good faith and effort' in the cause of equity and social justice ... we need to acknowledge the 'risks' and believe that they are worth taking' (Cole, 2005: 342). In view of this, and given that inclusion within the mainstream remains an ideal for many parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities, it is necessary to examine more closely the impact of inclusion policy on children and schools.

## **Normalising Discourses: Standards versus inclusion**

The current emphasis on closing the achievement gap between learners with and without special educational needs inevitably marginalises those learners who cannot subscribe to the values of a neoliberal marketised society.

For Armstrong:

Inclusion is a normative concept. Its colonisation, under the banner of academic opportunity and high standards for all, serves to normalise the values of individual responsibility for individual achievement.  
(Armstrong, 2005: 147)

Linda Dunne's critique of contemporary discourses of inclusion (Dunne, 2009) provides a useful basis for critically analysing inclusion policy. Although Dunne essentially offers a critique of New Labour's inclusion policy, the increasing focus on neoliberal values by recent and current governments in England has resulted in inclusion becoming 'a potentially normalising, hegemonic discourse' (Dunne, 2009: 44) which perpetuates exclusion. In policy documents, inclusion is presented as a 'fundamental good and worthwhile endeavour' (Dunne, 2009: 42). Consequently, it has been internalised by educators in this way and has, to a large extent, remained unquestioned (Dunne, 2009). According to Foucault:

Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.  
(Foucault, 1980: 131)

The official scripts of inclusion have been presented as the route to equity and social justice. Inclusion is intertwined with high achievement and raising aspirations for all. Interrogating and questioning these powerful discourses is a dangerous move due to the risk of being accused of having low expectations of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

However, the official policy scripts that promote inclusion also promote a pathologising form of exclusion which reinforces injustice and creates discrimination.

Dunne illustrates how inclusion is constructed within 'a powerful othering framework' (Dunne, 2009: 49) in which pupils with disabilities and special educational needs are placed under increasing surveillance, subjected to intervention programmes and segregated from the majority in order to normalise them.

The traditional language of special educational needs is used to describe individuals which serves a pathologising function and creates divisions between pupils (Thomas and Loxley, 2007; Dunne, 2009). The needs of the school to create order and maintain high standards are passed onto the child (Thomas and Loxley, 2007) in an uncritical way. Current notions of inclusion operate within a traditional framework of special education which privileges the medical model of disability. Within this framework failure is blamed on the child, rather than critical questions being asked about the contribution of the school (Skidmore, 2004) or policy to educational failure. A process of intervention places an onus on the child to make improvements and this further reinforces a sense of failure. According to Dunne 'each time difference is named, made visible or created ... the invisibility and the power of a fictionalised normativity, and of hegemony, is strengthened and secured' (2009: 52).



The marketisation of education has resulted in the reproduction of wider inequalities (Goodley, 2007) as schooling continues to fail those students who are not able (or choose not) to fulfil their responsibilities to society in an entrepreneurial way (Masschelein and Simons, 2005). Within a performative educational climate Ball (2003) argues that 'the new vocabulary of performance renders old ways of thinking and relating dated or redundant or even obstructive' (p. 218). Traditional caring discourses and practices of 'careful teaching' (Corbett, 1992) are displaced with a performative regime which values and rewards educational outputs above relationships. Developing caring relationships with pupils seemingly has 'no place in the hard world of performativity' (Ball, 2003: 222) because the focus is on improving school performance and outputs. This broader educational context is incompatible with educational inclusion (Cole, 2005) because inevitably not all learners are able to achieve the desired outputs.

Contemporary discourses of inclusion serve a disciplinary function, rather than promoting equity (Armstrong, 2005) and those who threaten the status quo are isolated and contained in special units. Children with behavioural, social and emotional issues are segregated and contained in Pupil Referral Units and consequently marginalised. They are labelled as deviants without any critical interrogation of the 'within school' factors (inappropriate curriculum or assessment processes which label them as failures) or external factors (inappropriate parenting or lack of cultural capital) that may have contributed to their 'undesirable' behaviours. Other children with special needs are

subjected to additional intervention which further reinforces a sense of failure and highlights their differences. The problems are squarely located within the child, rather than within schooling itself or society, thus reflecting a medical rather than social model of disability.

According to Roulstone and Prideaux (2008) one of the significant problems with functionalist models of education 'is the assumption that the norms and values being inculcated are equitable, shared and advantageous to all' (p.17). The National Curriculum fails to provide a relevant and worthwhile education for some children with complex needs (Wedell, 2008). Despite it being held up as an entitlement for all, it serves to further perpetuate a sense of failure through setting out norms which some children will never achieve. Consequently some children are marginalised by an education system that assumes that inclusion is synonymous with equality of provision rather than equality of opportunity.

According to Graham and Slee (2008), inclusion, whilst originally offered as a radical transformation of education, is increasingly being used to protect the status quo within schools. Whilst educational policy in England has, for the last fifteen years, continued to emphasise the language of inclusion, it has also at the same time maintained the language of the medical model through the apparatus of special educational needs. Whilst policy may have advanced, practices have remained largely consistent (Fulcher, 1989; Kay, Tisdall and Riddell, 2006). Armstrong (2005) argues that little has changed since the publication of the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) and that special

education continues to depoliticise educational failure by placing blame on the individual rather than on society at large.

According to Cole (2005):

Policies of inclusion have to exist within the context of the broader, general education policy...In such a relationship there will be winners and losers and it is suggested that the losers will be the children who are deemed as having special educational needs.

(Cole 2005:334)

Fulcher (1999) has argued that the competitive standards driven education system has produced a 'potentially hostile context' (p151) for the development of inclusive education policies. The current education system celebrates high achievement over the valuing of difference (Goodley, 2007) which inevitably forces educators to invest more time into those learners who will produce valued outputs. Within this performative context Giroux (2003) reminds educators that they have a responsibility to reject forms of schooling that marginalise students through a systemic pattern of failure. However, within a culture of performativity, which drives high standards and punishes those (educators and students) who fail to achieve these, rejecting the principles of performativity, in the absence of policy change, is a dangerous move to make.

Lloyd (2008) has highlighted how educational policy is geared towards standardisation and normalisation rather than the 'denormalization' (p228) of schooling. She argues that the way in which achievement and success are measured creates barriers to full participation and achievement which inevitably results in exclusion. Her solution calls for a reconceptualisation of what constitutes '*achievement*'. Consequently she identifies that there is a

need to broaden definitions of what is meant by *success* and *achievement* and alter the way in which they are measured. Such a policy change is needed to enable educators to practise the policy of inclusion. In the absence of this, those mainstream schools with high proportions of children with special educational needs or disabilities will continue to be penalised in school inspections due to the negative impact on school achievement data. Indeed, the development of sink schools with higher compositions of children with special educational needs has been discussed in the literature (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995; Corbett, 1998; Cole, 2005). Additionally, in the absence of such a policy change low-attaining students will become unattractive to schools (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006) and schools will adopt a narrow view of inclusion rather than a 'principled way of viewing the development of education and society' (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006; 297). More significantly perhaps is the impact of including learners with complex needs into a largely unchanged curriculum and exclusive assessment processes which will further reinforce a sense of failure and perpetuate exclusion.

As Goodley (2007: 322) put it 'academic excellence is troubled by those who might never be capable of (nor interested in) such achievements'. However, it is important to remember that inclusion necessitates a 'radical reform of the school in terms of curriculum, assessment pedagogy and grouping of pupils' (Mittler, 2000: 10). In the absence of policy change teachers cannot be 'change agents' (Nind, 2005: 273) because inclusion does not just demand a pedagogical response, it necessitates a political response.

## **Intertwining the two agendas**

This paper has argued that the standards agenda and the inclusion agenda are in opposition and has supported the work of Christine Lloyd in arguing that there is a need to broaden out notions of *success* and *achievement*. However, given that the growth of the marketisation of education is unlikely to be reversed, Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) have emphasised that it is helpful to focus on how inclusive cultures can contribute to the standards agenda. The researchers have demonstrated through small-scale case studies how inclusion can facilitate a process of reflection which engenders pedagogical change. In their study teachers' concerns with inclusion shaped the way they responded to the standards agenda by prompting teachers to examine ways of increasing student participation, engagement and motivation (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). Although the research demonstrated that the standards agenda narrowed and subverted the schools' interpretations of inclusion, the evidence suggested that inclusion can encourage teachers to confront ways in which they can develop more effective pedagogical approaches to maximise student participation and achievement (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse (2007) found that schools were able to mediate the tensions between the inclusion agenda and the demands of the market place through continually 'reinventing inclusion' (p.30) to meet the needs of their students. Their research found that schools were able to be inclusive and raise the achievement of all students, thus demonstrating that it is possible for the inclusion and standards agendas to be complementary.

Over a decade ago Lunt and Norwich (1999) argued that whilst inclusion can have a negative effect on school performance indicators, defining school effectiveness in relation to pupil outcomes exclusively is unhelpful. All schools can be effective in some aspects of education and less effective in other aspects. The entanglement of notions of *school improvement* with *school effectiveness* has resulted in schools mediating the tensions between the principles of equity and improving academic attainment (Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse, 2007). Disentangling school effectiveness from school improvement would certainly be beneficial to the inclusion agenda. Therefore schools with inclusive cultures should be recognised as being effective in the celebration and promotion of diversity and school inspections should take account of this when making judgements about overall school effectiveness.

### **Critique of current policy**

Both the government White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DFE, 2010) and the Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability* (DFE, 2011) express concerns about the progress of children with special educational needs in comparison with other children. The government propose to sharpen accountability by introducing an indicator in the school performance tables which provides information about the progress of the lowest attaining pupils. Such a move could potentially be disastrous for the inclusion agenda because although low attainment is not synonymous with SEN, there is evidence to suggest that overall achievement in schools with high proportions of children with SEN is lower than in schools with reduced proportions of children with SEN (Lunt and Norwich, 1999). In

the face of this, schools will be increasingly reluctant to admit children who are unlikely to demonstrate the required progress and even more likely to exclude such pupils. Although schools are unable to directly discriminate against pupils with special educational needs, there is the likelihood that schools will employ various discreet approaches which result in exclusion.

The Green Paper *Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability* (DFE, 2011) specifically refers to the problem of the over-identification of special educational needs through the inappropriate labelling of children with special educational needs at the *School Action* stage. The label then excuses failure and results in a culture of low expectations (DFE, 2011). The government propose to introduce one school-based assessment stage rather than the two stages of *school action* and *school action plus* (DFES, 2001) which currently exists. Whilst there is no doubt that labels can have a pathologising effect on children and lead to categorisation, there is a clear expectation within these policy documents that schools, teachers and children must work harder in order to drive up achievements. Within this policy framework there is no recognition that the curriculum or assessment processes are inappropriate to cater for the diverse range of learners' needs. Additionally, the policy of removing *school action* from the school-based assessment stage will inevitably result in increased surveillance, intervention and remediation with a view to maximising progress and achievement. In the absence of formal labels, children who struggle to make the required progress will still be pathologised by their failure to demonstrate the necessary achievements. They will be singled out and

labelled as underachievers with no reasonable defence for their 'failure'. The exclusionary effects of this will be experienced by those learners who are struggling to achieve desired progress levels and their teachers who are subsequently blamed for their educational 'failure'.

The Green Paper (DFE, 2011) specifically mentions factors such as communication difficulties, mental health problems and problems within families as causes of poor behaviour. It fails to consider the contribution of an inappropriate curriculum to pupil disengagement. Additionally, it fails to take into consideration the extent to which the performative culture and the marketisation of education can result in pupil disengagement. It is only by addressing these fundamental issues that inclusion can be advanced.

Disappointingly neither the Green Paper nor the White Paper offer any hope for advancing educational inclusion. It is reassuring that special schools are no longer classed as second rate establishments and that mainstreaming is no longer the only route to inclusion. However, it is a concern that the government has not asked critical questions about the extent to which the curriculum and the achievement agenda contribute to disengagement, failure and exclusion. The assumption that the standards which are being promoted are appropriate for all learners continues to dominate educational policy. Within current policy there is no hope of a radical transformation of the curriculum or the assessment processes which underpin education. In the absence of a transformation the most vulnerable learners will continue to be singled out for specialised attention. They will continue to be pathologised and



treated as an othered group, even if labels and categories of SEN are not applied. They will continue to be failed by the education system that was supposedly set up to support them. In short, they will continue to be marginalised. Schooling will continue to produce exclusion (Slee, 2001). In the absence of policy change the most effective inclusive schools will continue to develop democratic cultures and practices which enable learners to make realistic progress. In some schools achievement rates may be too small for the government but significant for the learners themselves. The extent of this progress will ultimately determine the fate of these schools.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has critically examined the tensions inherent within government educational policy and the ways in which official scripts of inclusion conflict with notions of equity and social justice. This paper has argued that the current focus on performativity marginalises learners with special educational needs and constructs barriers to their participation and achievement. Official policy scripts of inclusion continue to emphasise the driving up of standards as the mechanism through which inclusion is to be achieved. However, such policies merely reflect integration rather than inclusion through their failure to critically deconstruct notions of what constitutes achievement and transform the curriculum and assessment processes which learners are subjected to. Education continues to single out learners and categorise them by their inability to meet a set of norm-related standards.

In contrast, inclusion for the purposes of equity and social justice demands a proactive response at a political rather than a pedagogical level. Educators and academics should continue to challenge the inherent injustices within the official scripts of inclusion and demand policy change which recognises and values different forms of success (Lloyd, 2008). Unless there is a fundamental policy change schooling will continue to produce exclusion, as it has always done so in the past (Slee, 2001), and inclusion will simply remain policy rhetoric. In the absence of such policy change, educators should reflect on the pedagogical changes they can make to their own practices to maximise student participation and engagement. Such changes can impact positively on student progress and facilitate the development of inclusive school cultures.

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