

Residential Special Schooling: The Inclusive Option!

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Introduction: normalisation and inclusion

Culham and Nind (2003) have argued that normalisation and inclusion are guiding philosophies which have a common end but radically different approaches to attaining that end. Whilst there is a shared desire to see people with special needs as valued members of the community, there is a fundamental difference. In normalisation, community presence and value are earned through minimising difference, whereas in inclusion, the person's difference is welcomed and valued. One way of eradicating that difference is through the process of assimilation (Allan, 1999). Assimilation, however, is at odds with the kind of empowerment strategies adopted by most other devalued groups (for example: ethnic minorities; women; people with physical and sensory disabilities) who celebrate their differences and welcome congregative identity and activity.

The philosophy of normalisation has left a legacy of negative attitudes with respect to the notion of 'normality'. Not only has normality tended to be viewed from a moral standpoint and equated with something good and desirable but also it has been seen as something that can and should be prescribed.

Inclusion is primarily concerned with overcoming the traditional boundaries between those with and those without a disability by focusing on the actions and responsibilities of everyone, not just those who are disadvantaged, disabled or otherwise marginalised. Disagreement usually revolves around the operationalisation of the concept and on what is realistically achievable and desirable (Hornby, 1999; Low, 1997).

The starting point for inclusionists is the recognition that inclusion is a right. This places a responsibility on all of us not to allow this human right to be ignored or transgressed. The response to those critics questioning the efficacy of inclusion (Hornby, 1999) has been that because inclusion is a human right – a self-evident good – there is no point in seeking empirical proof of its value (Mittler, 2000).

Wolfensberger (2003) has cautioned against the tendency to divorce rights from their attendant obligations and has expressed particular concern at the increasing radicalisation of the inclusionist movement – its confrontational stance and strident language – which threatens to antagonise and alienate those whose support is vital if appropriate services for people with special needs are to be developed.

What inclusionists have yet to resolve philosophically is what to do about those who want to exercise a right to stay outside of mainstream provision. There is still an assumption that a community of people who share a learning disability is in some way inferior to a mixed community in which people with a learning disability can be among peers who are more able. This paper seeks to challenge that assumption.

Inclusive vision

The Circular *Guidance on the Presumption of Mainstream Education*, issued by the Pupil Support and Inclusion Division of the Scottish Executive (2002), is clearly permeated by an inclusive vision. Such a vision is traditionally linked with a commitment to the enforcement of civil rights for all disabled people. All too often, however, this inclusive vision can be seen as part of a mission or moral crusade. The propagation of the inclusion principle within a crusade is both dangerous and counterproductive, for it can foster professional intolerance, division and disaffection (Hansen, 1976); lead to the application of powerful and insidious pressure on professional staff to conform (Boucherat, 1987); devalue the worth of those who, for valid professional reasons, find ground for criticism (Mesibov, 1990); promote the growth of a propaganda industry which places a low value on objectivity and truth (Jackson, 1989); prompt the use of strategies and techniques which indoctrinate rather than teach (Renshaw, 1986); encourage poorly trained professional staff to believe that the application of a simple formula will resolve the complex problem of delivering effective and humane services (Tadd, 1992); and result in the creation of an inflexible service that is unresponsive and insensitive to children's needs (Rhoades & Browning, 1977).

A further problem with presenting the case for inclusion in civil rights terms is that people with a disability do not constitute a homogeneous population. They do not share a single defining feature that sets them apart. Discussion on the topic of inclusion is not assisted where it is represented in civil rights terms and where the emotive language and rhetoric is drawn from the debate on racial and ethnic issues.

In the USA there has been increasing criticism of the inclusion movement, where the drive to full inclusion is seen as unhelpfully leading to an emphasis on:

- the process of education rather than educational outcomes;
- mainstream curricula rather than functional curricula;
- advocacy for programmes rather than advocacy for children;

- rhetoric rather than research evidence.

(Hornby, Atkinson & Howard, 1997)

The crucial point that advocates of the inclusion principle miss but which earlier writers took pains to stress is that inclusion is a philosophy and not a technology (Tizard, 1964; Nirje, 1969; Jackson, 1996). It is a system of values and beliefs which should help guide, not dictate, thought and action. This necessitates a sensitive and pragmatic approach, not an inflexible and dogmatic one. Thus empirical examination should replace polemics; not to do so is to engage in a massive programme of social engineering (Zigler, Balla & Kossan, 1986).

Inclusion through semantic sleight of hand

One way in which inclusion can be introduced is through semantic sleight of hand. For example, over a decade ago the former Strathclyde Region published a policy paper on special education entitled *Every Child is Special* (1993). The key principles underpinning Strathclyde's policy were that:

- each child has individual learning needs;
- positive discrimination should be exercised in favour of those who are disadvantaged;
- children with special needs should not be segregated.

The document argued that it was necessary to take a broad view of what constituted special educational needs. It made reference to the 1978 HMI report which estimated that 50 per cent of children experienced learning difficulties (Her Majesty's Inspectorate, 1978); much more than the 20 per cent estimated by the Warnock Committee (Department of Education and Science, 1978). It was then asserted that any individual could experience difficulties in some contexts. Thus there was a progressive widening (or dilution) of the definition of special educational needs to the point where it becomes virtually meaningless.

The logic underpinning the first principle took the following form: all children have learning difficulties; special educational needs derive from learning difficulties; therefore, all children have special educational needs. Notwithstanding the suspect nature of the above propositions, the conclusion drawn is that every child is special, the snappy but empty title of Strathclyde's document. The logical *coup de grâce* is that if every child is special then there must be a sense in which no child is special.

One possible consequence of the proclamation and acceptance of this slogan was that the case for retaining and supporting existing specialist services in Strathclyde Region (i.e. special schools) for what might be termed the Warnock 20 per cent was seriously weakened. One is left to speculate whether the logical shortcomings and the semantic confusion here resulted from careful or careless deliberation on the part of the policy-makers.

The second principle was that a policy of positive discrimination must be more than a general recognition that some people have greater needs than others—it should constitute a commitment to deploy resources to meet their needs. Precisely how Strathclyde reconciled its notion that every child was special with a policy of positive discrimination is unclear.

The third principle advanced was that children should be placed in ‘the least restrictive environment’ compatible with meeting their needs. This principle has been borrowed directly from the least restrictive alternative principle which has guided judicial and legislative thinking and decision-making in the USA. The right to the least restrictive alternative is nothing more than a requirement that common sense and respect for the humanity and individuality of every person be the touchstone of the law.

What Strathclyde Regional Council succeeded in doing was rendering meaningless the term ‘special educational needs’. Mackay (2002) has recently expressed his concern at the tendency for policy-shapers and policy-makers to argue that disability does not exist and has asserted that:

... our job is not to make disability go away, nor pretend that it is not there. Instead, it is to respect its complexity, to respond to it with honesty, vision and intelligence. (Mackay, 2002, p.162)

A similar sentiment is expressed in the papal message addressed to participants in the 2004 International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person:

A subtle form of discrimination is also present in politics and educational projects that seeks to conceal or deny the deficiencies of disabled people by proposing lifestyles and objectives that do not correspond to their reality and turn out to be unjust and frustrating. (Vatican, 2004, p. 1)

Inclusion in practice

What evidence is there that the policy of inclusion is working? The Audit Commission (2002), in a recent survey of inclusion practice in England, found a tension between the standards agenda and the policy of inclusion. Almost

every head teacher interviewed by the Commission raised the issue of 'league tables' of school performance which were seen as having a damaging impact on staff morale and leading to a reluctance by some schools to admit children with special educational needs. It was the Commission's view that the Government should create new systems whereby schools could celebrate their work with children with special educational needs – such as raising its profile in school inspection and flagship initiatives, or introducing awards for inclusive practice. The Commission noted that some children with special educational needs were regularly excluded from certain lessons and extra-curricular activities and that most children who were permanently excluded from school had special educational needs: almost 9 out of 10 from primary schools and 6 out of 10 from secondary schools. The Commission concluded that in contrast to the national focus on standards of attainment, little was known about how well children with special educational needs did in school. It was found that barely half of LEAs surveyed by the Commission systematically monitored the school performance of children with special educational needs whilst monitoring by governors was found to be very variable.

In a recent review of the literature on inclusion, Dockrell, Peacey and Lunt (2002) noted that there has been very little research which has succeeded in identifying those features of schools which might be termed 'effective' or 'inclusive'. This is in part due to the difficulty of defining 'effectiveness' and 'inclusiveness' and in part due to the separate traditions of research and evaluation in these two areas. The authors acknowledge that it is difficult to evaluate the outcome of inclusive education and that the studies which have attempted to do so have been largely inconclusive. In fact there is no evidence of any serious attempt to evaluate outcomes of *any* form of provision for pupils with special educational needs (Hegarty, 1993; Farrell, 2000).

On the basis of the evidence available, Dockrell et al. (2002) found that children with special educational needs were routinely excluded. The authors noted that many everyday decisions about inclusion in the curriculum were complex and placed considerable demands on teachers' moral and professional capacity. The review highlighted a number of significant gaps in the current knowledge about and provision for children with special educational needs. In the authors' opinion, the lack of data about the needs and progress for children who did not have statements was particularly disconcerting.

A recent study examined the experiences of a group of physically disabled students who moved from mainstream schools into a special needs further education college. (Pitt & Curtin, 2004). While acknowledging the small scale nature of the research, the findings are worth noting. The reasons identified by the students for moving were: (1) problems with physical access; (2) the lack of resources and additional classroom support; (3) the limited access to

therapy; and (4) the negative attitudes of staff and other students. Of those interviewed, the overwhelming experience of mainstream school had been one of social isolation, loneliness, overt and covert bullying and non-acceptance by non-disabled peers.

In the specialist college, the participants enjoyed positive relationships with staff, a greater flexibility in timetabling which permitted their therapy and course requirements to be better accommodated. Since attending the specialist college participants had also changed how they viewed their disability and felt more optimistic and confident about themselves. These changes in self-image were attributed to the encouraging attitudes of staff and fellow students. The participants were agreed that disabled students should have the opportunity to attend either mainstream or special school with the decision resting upon the students' individual strengths and weaknesses. The key factor singled out here was the opportunity for choice.

Cummins and Lau (2003), in a further review of the relevant literature, have indicated that the simple belief that mainstreaming is a positive experience for all children cannot be sustained by reference to the empirical literature. Just as it cannot be assumed that all children with a disability will make better developmental and scholastic progress in an integrated environment, so it cannot be assumed that all children with a disability will be embraced by their non-disabled peers. A further factor to which Cummins and Lau (2003) draw attention is the attitude of the teachers to the inclusion of pupils with a disability in their classroom. Few teachers have a choice on the matter and may resent the children's inclusion for a variety of reasons. These may include feelings of personal and professional inadequacy to manage a mixed ability class, concerns about time distribution between class members, or even philosophical opposition to inclusive education. And there is no doubt that teacher attitudes to children with a disability can impact on the children's self-respect (Jordan & Stanovich, 2001).

Increasing concern with the effects of the policy of inclusion was voiced at the annual conference of the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) in 2004. Delegates had difficulty in reconciling the policy of inclusion with the government's enthusiastic support for the development of specialist provision for able pupils and the maintenance of a small but influential independent school sector. Delegates were also unable to reconcile the policy of inclusion with the strong internal and external competitive pressures brought about by the adoption of a 'target culture' and the introduction of league tables. These were seen as seriously disadvantaging pupils with special needs. It was predicted that the pursuit of the policy of inclusion would result in increased pupil disruption and disaffection which, in turn, would accelerate the exodus of teachers from the profession thus making

an already difficult situation worse. The NASUWT urged the government to retain the traditional system of special schools and units which permitted those who needed it access to an appropriate education delivered by teachers with the relevant experience and expertise within a specially designed and supportive environment. At the conclusion of their debate, delegates overwhelmingly backed the call for more special schools to be built so that children with severe disabilities and serious behavioural problems received the education best suited to their needs.

But the challenge to the policy of inclusion has broadened beyond the concerns of members of the teaching profession. In its submission to the 2004 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Kirk's Education Committee questioned whether the presumption of mainstreaming could any longer be maintained. This follows upon a study commissioned by the Committee from the Scottish Council for Research in Education in which inclusive practice in two primary and two secondary schools was examined. The Committee stated that the evidence suggested that all the schools visited were working to the limits of their capacity in respect of including children with special needs. The Committee indicated that questions needed to be asked about the limits to which schools can adapt to special circumstances without jeopardising their capacity to respond effectively to the needs of all children. The fact that three of the four schools involved in the study had units and resource bases where children spent most of their time prompted questions about the meaning of mainstreaming (Henderson, 2004).

The case against the residential special school

Cole (1986) has identified some of the objections to residential special schooling which are commonly raised:

- it separates the child from his family and interferes with the natural pattern of a child's growing up with his parents, brothers and sisters;
- it isolates a child from her local community;
- it denies a pupil a normal childhood, mixing and growing up with local children in an ordinary day school;
- it cannot provide the width and variety of the ordinary secondary school curriculum, and therefore limits the educational opportunities and achievements of their pupils;
- it can be uncaring and institutionalised, with the result that children's emotional and social needs are neglected;

- it can cocoon a child in an overprotected community divorced from the harsh reality of the outside world;
- by mixing with children with even greater difficulties, the child's problems can be exacerbated;
- it can lessen a young person's employment prospects;
- it is too expensive.

However given the absence of hard empirical evidence, there is no means of judging whether any of these objections has any validity.

In a rather different critique, Morris (2002) has made the point that the placement of disabled children in residential special schools calls into question the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UN Convention upholds the rights of children:

- to live with their families, unless this is not in their best interests (Article 9);
- to be consulted and listened to (Article 12);
- to have 'special protection' if they are deprived temporarily or permanently of their family environment (Article 20);
- to have regular reviews of placements if they live away from home (Article 25);

Morris points to recent research which discovered that it was rare for disabled children to be consulted when decisions were being made about sending them to residential schools; there was no monitoring of care standards in the majority of such placements; there was rarely any consideration of disabled children's rights to 'active participation in the community'; and parents generally received no help in maintaining contact with their children (Abbott, Morris & Ward, 2001).

According to Ward, Abbott and Morris (2001), the research showed that for the overwhelming majority of parents, residential special school was not the preferred option, which was contrary to the common perception of many professionals that parents of disabled children were eager for their children to go to residential schools. However, in a later article, Morris (2002) presents a slightly different slant on this finding. She indicates that whilst education and social work departments were reluctant to consider residential school placements, parents frequently decided that such a placement was the only way in which their children's needs were going to be met. The parents also highlighted the difficult, protracted and acrimonious nature of the decision-making process right up to

the point at which the local authority eventually agreed to a residential school placement. By this time parents had often reached breaking-point. One of the most striking conclusions emerging from the research was that parents rarely experienced any sense that the local authorities wished to work in partnership with them in order best to meet the needs of their child.

Morris draws attention to the fact that the White Paper, *Valuing People*, highlighted the lack of information about disabled children in residential schools and residential homes (Department of Health, 2001). She indicates that one of the major barriers to meeting the needs of disabled children who are living away from their families is the hidden nature of their experience:

... we don't know enough about who they are, where they are, what their life feels like for them, or what they think would improve the quality of their lives. If we knew more about their experience as they see it, policy and practice might be more motivated by a profound sense of the injustice inflicted on these children. We should all feel outraged that so many children have gone missing from our society, that they are denied the things we all take for granted and that, as they reach adulthood, so many of them disappear into long-term residential provision. (Morris, 1995, p.31)

The findings reported by Morris do not constitute of themselves a convincing case against residential special schools, given the fact, conceded by Morris, that we know so very little about the quality of life for children in residential special schools. Whilst Morris is wholly justified in lamenting the absence of such research, she is not entitled to assume – in the absence of evidence to the contrary – that the experience for children in residential special schools is a wholly negative one.

The case for the residential special school

Cole (1986) has argued that whatever the moral and egalitarian arguments, it is unwise to disrupt an established special school network, whatever its faults, for an alternative whose superiority is not established on a firm empirical base. Evidence produced by the Fish Report (Inner London Education Authority, 1982) indicated that the majority of parents were satisfied with their children's placement in special schools. In Cole's opinion, maintaining a choice of integrated and segregated provision is important. For the vast majority of children with special educational needs, day provision, possibly as part of their local comprehensive system is likely to be preferable, but families should not be denied the option of a segregated alternative, sometimes residential, which might, in their particular circumstances, better meet their *family* needs.

The needs of the family

A fact frequently ignored in the debate on the merits of residential special schooling is that there are some families which are forced to withdraw into a state of self-imposed isolation either through fear that their child with special needs will be bullied and tormented by other children or verbally abused by neighbours. Parents experience this kind of isolation as a form of 'imprisonment' both for their child and themselves. In using the term 'imprisonment', parents are not simply seeking a convenient metaphor to describe their existence. They are selecting a word that precisely mirrors reality, for prejudice, rejection and hostility can combine to create a barrier as real and enduring as a prison wall (Jackson, 1996b; Taylor, 1999).

Critics have overlooked the important fact that the value of a residential special school does not rest simply on the advantages it confers upon the child. It serves two purposes of equal importance – it seeks to meet the individual needs of the child *and the collective needs of the family*. It provides time for parents and siblings to re-establish links with the world outside the home and to return to a more 'normal' family regime. What critics ignore is that the unquestioning pursuit of the principle of inclusion can lead to significant casualties – not just children but whole families (Saunders, 1994; Jackson, 1996b).

The study undertaken by Abbott, Morris and Ward (2001), which was cited by Morris as providing support for her argument against residential special schooling, merits closer examination. The study found that whilst the majority of the children and young people interviewed would not have chosen to go away to school, most appeared satisfied with their residential school experience. One of the principal benefits was the opportunity to be part of a friendship network. Most children interviewed were also positive about their relationships with the most important adult in the residential setting, their keyworker. The study noted that once the child had been admitted to the residential special school, most parents were very happy with the relationship they had with their child's school. The study, however, fails to give a clear and authoritative picture of children's experiences of residential special school life. In short, it does not provide an answer to the basic question posed in the report's title: *The best place to be?*

The findings of small-scale studies, the opinion of groups or individuals or the case histories of pupils and their families should not be overlooked (Campling, 1981; Jackson, 1996b; Jones, 1983; Taylor, 1999). Whilst findings from these sources cannot be accorded the same weight as findings derived from large scale studies, the generally positive picture that does emerge cannot be discounted. A further useful source of general information about the efficacy of residential special schooling can be found in the content of inspection reports issued by the Care Commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

A new approach to residential child care

A particular weakness in Morris' attack on residential special schools is its anglocentric emphasis, for no reference is made to residential child care practice in other countries. For example, if Morris had looked at practice in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, she would have found that the main requirement for people working in residential child care is a qualification in social pedagogy (Petrie, Boddy & Cameron, 2002). Social pedagogy is not narrowly concerned with just a child's schooling but relates to the whole child: body, mind, feelings, spirit, creativity and, crucially, the relationship of the individual to others (Hart & Monteux, 2004). It has much more in common with parenting than with social work or social care, as social pedagogues working in residential settings share *all aspects of the children's everyday lives*. Petrie et al. (2002) have expressed the view that:

Framing children's work in terms of pedagogy has the potential for an inclusive, normalising approach, with the main focus on children as children, while recognising that some children have special and additional needs. (Petrie et al., 2002, p. 34)

According to Petrie et al. (2002), the emphasis on relationships and living alongside children, expanding their world through creative activities and providing positive role models, has much to commend it in the UK. What is noteworthy here is the contention that those residential special schools which adopt a social pedagogic model provide a more inclusive and normal setting; one in which the individual needs of the children and young people are likely to be better met. Particularly important is the transformation in the nature of the relationship between care worker and child from clientship to friendship (Petrie et al., 2002).

It should be made clear that friendship should not be equated with friendliness. As John Macmurray has noted, whilst friendliness should not be despised, it is only the imitation of friendship and a poor substitute for the real thing (Costello, 2002). Friendship is the social cement that binds individuals and communities together. The most important feature of that relationship is its reciprocity which dispenses with all notions of those giving and those receiving care. Further, a relationship which is based on mutuality is a relationship of equals in which each learns from the other. Acceptance of this model presents a clear challenge to the purpose and value of conventional professional relationships.

But as Wolfensberger (2003) has observed, even if a child is fortunate enough to have a care worker who is a friend, that worker will be constrained by all manner of rules, regulations and restrictions from acting in true friendship. Further, whilst childcare agencies may assume some parental roles, they cannot offer the love that goes with the parental role. And where love is absent, Wolfensberger

argues, weak and devalued people will continue to be at risk of exposure to abuse and violence.

The Social Education Trust (2001) has acknowledged that whilst the adoption of social pedagogy in the UK would not offer a panacea, it could offer a number of significant strengths:

- services would be provided which better fitted the needs of individual children rather than the current situation where too often children have to fit the needs of the services;
- by taking an holistic overview of the child and the way in which all parts of the child's life come together, there would not be the narrow negative focus on client pathology;
- those working directly with children and young people under the banner of social pedagogy would be provided with a professional image and identity which would give them a sense of pride, self-worth and confidence;
- the debate associated with the establishment of a new profession could have an impact on the wider community's thinking about children, parenting and work with children and young people.

The wider acceptance of a social pedagogic approach would not only result in radical changes in the character of residential child care in Scotland but would necessitate fundamental changes in the nature and purpose of professional training for those working in child care services. Whilst detailed discussion of the merits or otherwise of establishing a new profession goes beyond the bounds of this paper, nevertheless the outcome of that debate will directly affect the role and future of residential special schools.

Conclusion

If the debate on the future of residential special schools is to be well informed and constructive then there is an urgent need for research to examine:

- the nature of decision-making processes as they relate to the placement of pupils with special educational needs;
- the nature and extent of parental involvement in these processes;
- the quality of life experienced by pupils in residential special schools;
- the quality of life experienced by pupils with special educational needs in mainstream settings;
- the transition of young people from residential special schools to the adult world.

An interesting question remains. What happens if the research undertaken unambiguously demonstrates that placement in residential special schools is not only beneficial for most pupils but also advantageous to their families? Will national governments, local authorities, professional workers and academics so firmly wedded to the policy of inclusion be prepared to abandon their view of the residential special school as an option of last resort?

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