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Title :

The Struggle for Inclusive Education – A Struggle Against Educational Apartheid

Abstract :

An educational system that segregates disabled people is increasingly offensive to all learners. It damages relationships between disabled and non-disabled people. It is grossly ineffective and a waste of our most valuable resource – human beings!

We have to be more creative in the way we value and actively encourage difference. More direct action is required to end this educational apartheid.

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"Change the label - say black instead of disabled and see if anybody would tolerate that kind of prejudice as it is against a disabled person."

Jim Hansen.

Headteacher of a Special School in Canada

To exclude learners described as having Special Needs, from their mainstream local schools and colleges, is an injustice to ALL learners. Such an injustice demands that we look more creatively at the way we operate within educational systems as they now exist, and begin to change our legislation and our practices. We have to find different ways of hearing each other, we have to find different ways of seeing each other, we have to find different ways of learning together and more importantly we have to find different ways of **being** together. Simultaneously, we must start articulating a vision for the future which will influence the wider political structures and encourage the growth of local mainstream schools and colleges in which every learner belongs, in which every learner is actively encouraged to contribute, and in which those contributions are received and valued for their richness and diversity. Those who administer and those who teach have to recognise and value changes necessary for learners to make their personal and unique contributions, they have to learn that different contributions can be valued equally to the benefit of the whole school, and that difference should not be sacrificed at the altar of the artificial and often arbitrary standardisation of learners.

We have to plan now for the inclusion of every child, to be supported into their local mainstream school and college. We have to provide support that is valued and so effective it could be compared with the support provided to Head teachers or Principals, where such individuals can function within an organisation without necessarily having to write, without necessarily having to understand all that goes on around them, without necessarily having to move themselves around the building and without necessarily having to accept support systems which do not meet their particular requirements. In advocating such a direction we recognise that, at the present time, not all mainstream schools and colleges are organised in such a way as to ensure the smooth integration of previously excluded learners; not all mainstream schools and colleges appreciate the benefits of inclusion; not all mainstream school and colleges appreciate the contributions of their existing learners.

Mainstream educational systems must be improved and made more welcoming and offer more hospitality to ALL learners. However, regardless of the criticisms legitimately directed at the local and national organisation of some mainstream schools and colleges, their crucial advantage is that they have a place within a local community, such a presence can provide the scrutiny of ordinariness which can inhibit often bizarre and sometimes damaging practices we have adopted in segregated settings. Such a location also allows for links to a wider community with a potential social network which can enable the learner to translate her/his presence into meaningful relationships within and beyond the school gates - relationships which, arguably enable us to sustain and give life.

The presence of ALL learners is the first step in the eradication of irrational fears about difference - differences which are, at present, used as license to exclude learners from meaningful friendships and participation in their local communities.

Communities, like mainstream schools, are not always organised in ways that accommodate and value difference. Communities are not always friendly and welcoming. Communities do not always recognise the value of richness and diversity in relationships. We believe communities suffer as a result of such deprivations. It is our view that communities and schools will continue to be ineffective and dysfunctional without the presence and gifts of ALL learners. Integration is the **first** step to a very important process called inclusion.

"Integration is traditionally interpreted as the amount of time a learner spends in a situation with other learners who are not disabled – the deep meaning of integration is expressed in terms of "inclusion", "belonging", "unity". It is not a placement. It is a philosophy that says classrooms and communities are not complete unless all learners with all needs and gifts are Welcome".

*Marsha Forest, Director
Centre for Integrated Education,
Toronto, Canada*

Such a change within the educational system cannot be seen in isolation from the wider political activities. Indeed some might argue that it is directly a result of the highly competitive climate, created by current political ideologies, which makes the philosophy of inclusive education a practical impossibility.

"Despite the fact that we are now witnessing the most explicit political interference on the part of the government in the field of education, there is an orthodoxy abroad which views any reference to the question of politics as being biased, irrelevant and counter-productive. This is particularly applicable to those who would seek to raise the question of politics in relation to special educational policy or practice. To do so is to raise doubts about the nature of your commitment and whether you have the proper interests of individuals with learning difficulties in view.

*Barton. Politics of Special Education.
1988; p.5-6. Falmer Press*

In spite of recent government dictates which would support the view of Barton, we will argue that the effective inclusion of learners cannot and should not be a choice. It is necessary to right a national injustice. It is urgent that we work more creatively to overcome such injustices. Inclusive education highlights the potential value for a "whole school". We have to articulate a greater vision and look beyond the present fragile initiatives which come from shallow educational myopia.

We recognise the very powerful constraints and the conscious attempts to perpetuate a climate of moral intimidation where special education is concerned. To argue the inclusion of all learners who have been labelled as having special educational needs in any organised way, or to question the existing status quo in special schools, is to be "playing politics" with "vulnerable learners and their families". We see the segregation of a learner away from their local friends, away from their local community and schools, as a highly damaging political act. The practice is one that would appear to have the tacit or overt support of people across a wide political spectrum. It is striking that members of the political left, who quite correctly struggle to eradicate racism, who struggle to eradicate sexism and other barriers within our society, remain quiet at the forced segregation of disabled learners, away from their local schools away from their families and away from their communities. We should recognise that there is no consensus within any part of the political spectrum. There is a desperate need for more creative debate about how we are able to embrace diversity and rid ourselves of the scandal of exclusion of disabled learners from our schools and colleges.

We do not take a neutral position on inclusive education, this would be equivalent to taking a neutral position on racism and sexism. We believe that the present system of segregated special schools is a form of apartheid, that it is equally damaging to the community to separate learners with different learning needs as it is to reject the contributions of people simply because of the colour of their skin.

It is important to recognise the parallels with other forms of injustice and segregation. It took women 80 years of struggle to take their rightful place in University life, the reason for their initial exclusion was because it was "scientifically" proven that women's brains were smaller than the male. When women first entered University in the 1870's they had to have a chaperon, they were not allowed into the main body of the University, they were expected to wait in ante rooms during break times, they were also expected to attend courses to prepare them for the "Real" university life, these courses were called "Springboard Courses", it was no doubt assumed that full inclusion would be damaging to their moral as well as their educational development. (extracts from a feature on Radio 4 Women's Hour Programme 9.12.94.) We ask anyone working in the segregated sectors of education to consider the parallels with learners labelled as having learning disabilities. Surely we should not expect people to wait another 80 years to right a similar injustice?

It is not our intention to justify inclusion. The arguments for such a philosophy have been won. We no longer justify racism, but fight it. The same struggle should apply to segregation in education. We seek to highlight ways to promote inclusion and also highlight some of the barriers it will be necessary to challenge in order to succeed.

"Examples of successful integration of children with almost any given disability, irrespective of severity, can be found somewhere in the United Kingdom... The overwhelming conclusion is that where integration does not happen it is because people with power to make changes do not want children with disabilities in our schools."

Booth T. 1983.

In Fulcher Disabling Policies. 1989 p.164. Falmer Press.

We have to demonstrate an active commitment to ending segregated schools and segregated units in mainstream schools and colleges. The illogicality of the present ritual of exclusion is quite bizarre: We take young learners, we label them as having a wide range of "special needs" -

the labels can be many and varied - with very little consensus as to the origins or meanings of the label, once the label has been successfully attached, it provides a license to have a learner removed from their local school and community. Having removed the person, we restrict their opportunities for developing friendships with others. We spend large sums of money transporting them on a daily basis, often in unsafe conditions (New Learning Together Vol III. J. Hall), to separate units outside their local community. Once we have excluded the learner we surround them with a multitude of "experts" who succeed in restricting their curricular activities by designing even more therapies and "special practices". Once we have collected sufficient numbers of children together, we make "statements" about them having the same "special needs".

It is rather ironic that after spending the whole of their school life in a segregated special school, the young learner is often presented with an "Independent Learners Programme" or "Preparation for Adult Life Programme", probably lasting for the final term of special school. Such programmes are expected to equip learners with the necessary skills to enable them to re-establish their place once more within the local community - the same community from which they were removed in the first instance. However, at this stage in their life, they have much more difficulty in establishing the network of relationships which were more likely to have developed as a result of their presence within their local community.

There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence which highlights the damage done to ALL when we segregate disabled children from their non disabled peers. We only have to ask the likely destination for children attending segregated schools, they tend to go to segregated college provision or segregated day centres, often living in segregated housing and segregated employment.

The year 2000 provides us with a benchmark by which time we should have planned the inclusion of ALL learners into their local mainstream schools colleges and universities. We cannot wait for legislation alone. The Warnock Report, which underpinned the 1981 Education Act, was hailed as the Integrationist Charter some fifteen years ago. This legislation has proved to be overly bureaucratic and unjust (CSIE Report 1992.) The 1993 Codes of Practice still fails to prevent the forced exclusion of disabled children from their local schools and communities.

We need a major shift in thinking about the value of schooling and the learning process. The present "special education system" is based upon a "deficiency model" or "medical model", which assumes that something is wrong with the individual. The special school and its staff are there to "put the wrong right", to "fix the child", to "get them ready", to go back into society. However, it is the deficiencies within the systems that fails to accommodate the diversity of abilities that we must address.

We should challenge the multitude of professionals who are in the lives of learners in segregated schools. We ask that we look at the systems in which they operate - systems which are damaging the lives of learners by barring their way to a rightful place within their local community and ask them to justify such injustice.

Since one form of segregation tends to lead to further segregated services, we challenge the local authorities to look seriously at their long term plan for the two-year-old child they will exclude and segregate tomorrow? What is that child's future within the present system?

We should encourage parents, and learners who have been negatively labelled, to question why the present segregated educational system exists, and to call for a more serious critique of the so called "special methods" and "specialisms" which exist in segregated special schools and units.

Jo is an eight-year-old child who has been labelled by the system as having severe and multiple learning disabilities. She is also blind. Her mother, Pat, struggled for over two years to get Jo into a mainstream primary school. It was a difficult struggle. The following, highlights some of the contrasts between the segregated special school and the mainstream primary.

At segregated school, Jo would come home with a dairy, once a week, on Friday. It didn't depend on much I had written the previous weekend, as the teacher usually wrote "everything is fine -too busy to write this week, I'll write more next week". That next week never came. I never knew what was going on. It was like suffering from amnesia for part of the week.

At mainstream school I get reports every day - all the little details helping me understand Jo's day. They don't come in the form of written statements, but the many comments, often unsolicited, come from the children. The class teacher and Jane, Jo's assistant, give me a brief but

detailed report which is balanced and correct, which I can evaluate. It used to take Jo 1.25 hours to get to school using the Local Authority system. The transport was unsafe - children were expected to ride in their wheelchairs, even though they hadn't been tested for car seat safety standard, and the harness the authority used were just to keep children in their seats. I had to arrange for a special car seat myself, to be fitted. I compromised, and it was tied onto the seat with rope.

Now it takes just 10 minutes to get to her new school. Once we get to school, Jo's push-chair is often taken by one of the passing children who guides Jo safely into school. The person who pushes her never stops talking, the lollipop man always greets Jo., I follow on behind, chatting to other children or parents.

It came as a great shock to me that much of Jo's day in the special school was spent slumped over in a chair, dribbling, unable to breathe properly. Jo does not use speech and nobody spoke to her, hardly anyone touched her, kissed her, was loving towards her. The staff often seemed very busy, they often told me that I was being unrealistic to expect them to do the most simple things for Jo.

Jo would sit in a row with the other non-ambulant children in the playground, most of them were slumped over in their push-chairs and wheelchairs, none of them could speak. The ambulant children would be playing at the far side of the playground with the apparatus. This. I was told, kept Jo "safe".

Now at her real school, Jo sits with her head upright. The children are encouraged to talk to her and they do all the time. They read her stories, tell her jokes, sing to her. While they are doing this, they are touching her, wiping the dribble from her mouth, moving a hair from her eyes, making sure her waist strap is not too tight. They put cream on her face, they wash her hands before lunch. If they are writing, they place a pencil between her fingers. They laugh when she laughs and they get worried when she cries. At playtime, they play with her in the playground, pushing her around at various speeds, negotiating paths through football games.

Whilst at the segregated school Jo would have to eat her full lunch and have a drink in 20 minutes, even though at home it would usually take me at least 30-40 minutes to feed Jo and another 20-30 minutes to give her a drink. Jo had to sit in an upright chair, with a lap strap, a large wedge between her knees which was very difficult to clip into or out of place, her feet were strapped down and a large grey table was also fixed into position. It was thought that if Jo associated a good thing with sitting up, it

would teach her to sit up. Jo has very little head control, so her head would be forced back, this would cause her mouth to open and food would be pushed in. Jo screamed a lot at special school.

By spending time with Jo, Jane has learned to feed Jo in a way that she enjoys. Jo is not strapped into her chair, she is not rushed, she has her friends around, she does not scream now. By watching Jo eat and watching Jane feed Jo, the other children have come to understand that Jo cannot feed herself or drink herself, but now her friends make sure she does not go hungry or thirsty.

When Jo went to the special school she was being taken out of her local community. Jo had no presence, people didn't know her, she certainly had no friends of her own age. Now, in her local school, she has many friends, not just school friends, but people of different ages. Brothers and sisters of Jo's classmates, friends of friends know of Jo.

Jo and I used to need organised respite care when she was in the special school. Neither of us liked it. The specialists had suggested it, therefore, it must be right. For so long, I believed that the special schools, with all the experts, knew what to do with Jo. I now know this is wrong.

We don't need respite care any more. Jo now stays at her friends houses, like any other child, she sleeps in the same bed as her friends. Her school friends stay the night at our house. Jo and her friends now go out together during weekends and holidays. She is invited to parties and out to play, and even though Jo does not use speech, her friends will telephone her. Jo knows she belongs.

Children with "special" labels are segregated everywhere. Jill and Bob Long, in Wichita, Kansas, have two children, Rachel and Dylan. They are an important part of an international network promoting inclusive education. Their experience with special school and services was very similar to the experience of Pat and Jo.

They gave her a label before we had given a name. However well-intentioned, whether by accident or design, the psychologists, social workers, therapists, special educators, who converged upon this label - for they failed to see the child - are in the business of building burdens. Families, friendship, community, inclusion. are about something far different. They are about retrieving dreams.

Our ten year old daughter, Rachel, spent the first three years of her life shuttling between therapy appointments, developmental evaluations, infant stimulation programmes, special education pre-schools, all of which served their function well: indoctrinating our family into a "special" world of isolation and rejection.

This process of indoctrination is about building walls. Walls between parent and child, walls between brother and sister, walls between classrooms, walls separating children one from the other. Invisible yet impenetrable walls.

When you live within these walls, you become powerless to see beyond them. Eventually, you grow accustomed to the sparseness and sterility of the "special" world, and forget what you knew of the real world, even fearing what exists beyond the walls. Those in the business of building burdens, would consider this outcome "successful indoctrination".

Fortunately, the walls of the "special" world created around us began to collapse of their own weight, began to crumble here and there. First, a bit of light from the real world leaked into our "special" fortress, illuminating the loneliness residing there. And then, a hand reached in and took our hands, and together we tore down the remaining walls. And in the rubble of it all, we began collecting, retrieving, pieces of our dream.

This is not to say, however, that there is no rejection in the real world. Rachel like all of us, and even more than most of us, is vulnerable to the threat of rejection. It is there when we are seated in an isolated corner of a restaurant. It is there when we're told "there are special recreational programmes for kids like her". It is there in human and charitable services campaigns of pity and exploitation. It is there in the perpetuation of a "special" and separate world. But it is not in the eyes, in the smiles, in the arms of her friends. It is not in the noisy lunchroom or spirited classroom of the ordinary school she attends.

Rachel loves and is loved. She belongs- not just to her family, but to her friends. She is included - not simply because she sits at a desk among her age peers, but because she is welcomed wholly and authentically within a caring and just community of learners. This was, and will always be, our dream. A simply dream. We found it, seven years ago, when we left behind the boundary of their walls.

We do not suggest that inclusive education is an easy option, or that it will be without struggle. We do not seek to avoid debate about the most effective strategies, nor do we suggest the inclusion of all learners into mainstream schools is the panacea for all our social, economic and political ills. We also recognise the resource issues that are often presented as the only barriers, "Of course I believe in full integration, if only I had the resources." This underpins a major assumption that we can't afford such a significant change. This assumption demands a greater degree of scrutiny. In 1992 Lancashire Education Authority spent almost 9 million pound, sending four hundred children out of the authority for special education, they spent almost 4 million pounds on daily taxi fares within the authority transporting children away from their local schools and communities. (Source Lancashire Local Education Authority 1992).

"There are those that argue that to allow all children to belong in the ordinary system is too expensive. We have found this not to be true. further, we'd suggest that the argument of financial resources is one based upon fear rather than any serious study of the issue. The cost of including a disabled learner is quite easily measurable, but the cost to the community of excluding the same learner from their peers is incalculable.

*George Flynn. Director of Education.
Kitchener Waterloo, Canada*

Each of us must choose our starting point when challenging existing practices of segregated education. We seek to highlight the deep injustice and the damage we have witnessed to individuals, schools and communities by the perpetuation of "special services". We believe there are no neutral bystanders, we must make no apologies for attempting to end the segregated world of "A special educational system".